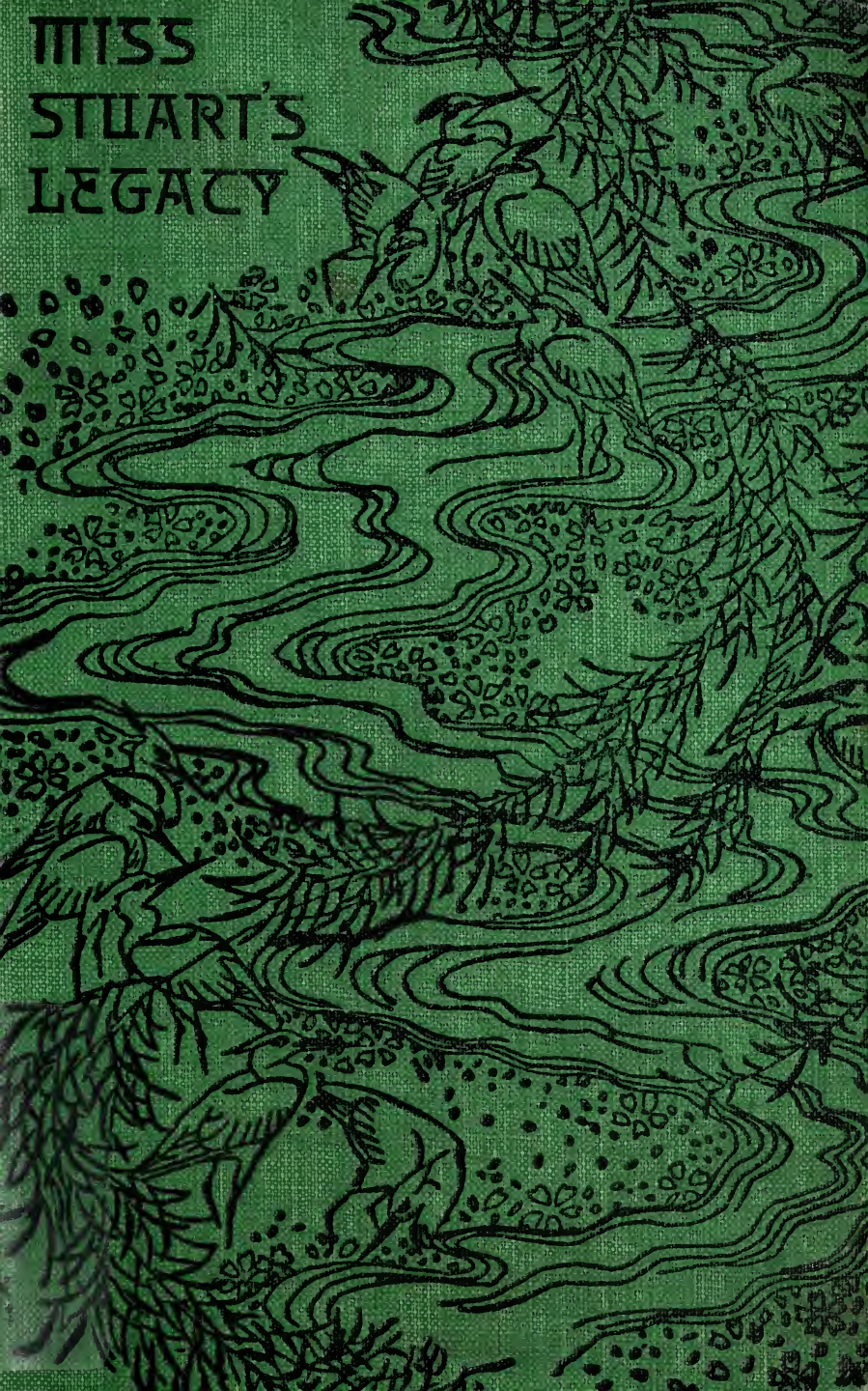
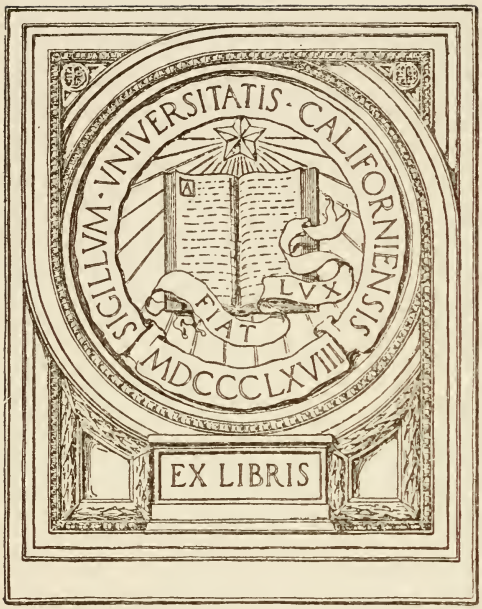
MISS STUART'S LEGACY

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Miss Stuart's Legacy

By

Flora Annie Steel

AUTHOR OF
'ON THE FACE OF THE WATERS,' ETC.

London

William Heinemann

1900

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MISS STUART'S LEGACY.

CHAPTER I.

An Indian railway station in the first freshness of an autumn dawn, with a clear decision of light and shade, unknown to northern latitudes, lending a fictitious picturesqueness to the low-arched buildings festooned with purple creepers. There was a crispness in the air which seemed to belie the possibility of a noon of brass; yet the level beams of the sun had already in them a warning of warmth.

The up-country mail had just steamed out of the station after depositing a scanty store of passengers on the narrow platform, while the down-country train, duly placarded with the information that it carried the homeward-bound mail, had shunted in from the siding where it had been patiently awaiting the signal of a clear line. The engine meanwhile drank breathlessly at the tank, where, in a masonry tower overhead, a couple of bullocks circled round and round, engaged in raising the water from the well beneath to the reservoir beside them.

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Round and round sleepily, while the primeval wooden wheel creaked and clacked, and the clumsy rope-ladder with its ring of earthen pots let half their contents fall back into the bowels of the earth; round and round dreamily, with the fresh gurgle of the water in their ears, and the blindness of leathern blinkers in their eyes; round and round, as their forebears had gone for centuries in the cool shade of sylvan wells. What was it to the patient creatures whether they watered a snorting western demon labelled "homeward mail," or the chequered mud-fields where the tender wheat spikelets took advantage of every crack in the dry soil? It was little to them who sowed the seed, or who gave the increase, so long as the goad lay in some one's hands. So much the cattle knew, and in this simple knowledge were not far behind the comprehension of their driver, who, wrapped in his cotton sheet, lay dozing while he drove.

The sweetmeat-seller dawdled by, pursued even at dawn by his pest of flies. The water-carriers lounged along uttering their monotonous chant, "Any Hindu drinkers? Any Mussulman drinkers?" while in their van, dusky hands stretched out holding metal cups and bowls, from the very shape of which the religion of the owners might be inferred, owners sitting cheek by jowl in third-class compartments with a gulf unfathomable, impassable,

between them in this world and the next. The lank yellow dogs crept among the wheels, licking a precarious meal from the grease-boxes. The grey-headed carrion-crows sat in lines on the wire fencing with beaks wide open in unending yawns. Nothing else appeared to mark the passage of time; indeed the absence of hurry on all sides gave the scene a curious unreality to Western eyes, a feeling which was plainly shown in the expression of a young girl who stood alone beside a small pile of luggage.

"A new arrival," remarked a tall man in undress uniform, who was leaning against the door of a first-class compartment, and talking to its occupants.

"Yes, to judge by complexion and baggage," was the reply. "You'd hardly believe it, but Kate was as trim once; now! — just look at the carriage!"

A gay laugh came from behind a perfect barrier of baths, bundles, and bassinettes. "We hadn't four babies to drag about in those days, George, and I can assure Major Marsden that I'm not a bit ashamed of them, or my complexion. George, dear! do for goodness' sake get baby's bottle filled with hot water at the engine; if he doesn't have something to eat he will cry in ten minutes, and then *you* will have to take him."

While George, with the proverbial docility of the Anglo-Indian husband and father, strolled off on his

errand, the feminine voice came into view in the shape of a cheerful round little woman with a child in her arms and another clinging to her dress. She looked with interest at the girl on the platform. "She seems lonely, doesn't she?"

Major Marsden frowned. He had been thinking the same thing, though he was fond of posing as a man devoid of sentiment; a not unusual affectation with those who are conscious of an over-soft heart. "I wonder what she is doing here," he said, kicking his heels viciously against the iron step of the carriage.

A twinkle of mischief lurked in his companion's blue eyes as she replied:

> "'What are you doing here, my pretty maid?'
> 'Going a-marrying, sir,' she said.

Can't you see the square wooden box which betrays the wedding cake?"

"Then if you want to do a Christian act, — and you ladies love aggressive charity — just step out of your car as *dea ex machina*, and take her home again. India is no place for Englishwomen to be married in."

"Now don't go on! I know quite well what you are going to say, and I agree, — theoretically. India is an ogre, eating us up body and soul; ruining our health, our tempers, our morals, our manners, our babies."

The laugh died from her lips at the last word, for the spectre of certain separation haunts Indian motherhood too closely to be treated as a jest. Instinctively she held the child tighter to her breast with a little restless sigh; a short holiday at home, and then an empty nest, — that was the future for her! So she went on recklessly: "Oh, yes! Of course we are all bad lots, — neither good mothers, nor good wives."

"My dear Mrs. Gordon! I never said one or the other. I only remarked that Englishwomen had no business in India."

"What's that?" asked George, returning with the bottle.

"Only Major Marsden in a hurry to get rid of me," replied his wife.

"Don't believe her, Gordon! For all-embracing generalities, convertible into rigid personalities at a moment's notice, commend me to you, Mrs. Gordon. But there, I regret to say, goes the last bell."

The train moved off in a series of dislocations, which, painful to witness, were still more painful to endure, and Philip Marsden was left watching the last nod of George Gordon's friendly head, with that curious catching at the heart which comes to all Anglo-Indians as they say good-bye to the homeward-bound. He was contented enough, happy in his work and his play; yet the feeling of exile ran

through it all, — as it does always, till pension comes to bid one leave the interests and friends of a lifetime. Then, all too late, the glamour of the East claims the heart, in exchange for the body.

The girl was still standing sentinel by her luggage, and as he passed their eyes met. In sudden impulse he went up and offered help if she required it. His voice, singularly sweet for a man, seemed to make the girl realise her own loneliness, for her lips quivered distinctly. "It is father! I expected him to meet me, and he has not come."

"Should you know him if you saw him?" She stared, evidently surprised, so he went on quickly, "I beg your pardon! I meant that you might not have seen him for some time, and — "

"I haven't seen him since I was a baby," she interrupted, with a sort of hurt dignity; "but of course I should know him from his photograph."

"Of course!" He scanned her face curiously, thinking her little more than a baby now; but he only suggested the possibility of a telegram, and went off in search of one, returning a minute afterwards with several. Behind him came the station-master explaining, with the plentiful plurals and Addisonian periods dear to babudom, that without due givings of names it was unpermissible, not to say non-regulation, to deliver telegrams.

"I forgot you couldn't know my name," said the

girl frankly, when a rapid scrutiny had shown that none were addressed to her. "I'm Belle Stuart; my father lives at Faizapore."

"Not Colonel Stuart of the Commissariat?"

"Yes! Do you know him?"

A radiant smile lit up her face with such a curve of red lips, and flash of white teeth, that the spectator might well have been infected by its wholesome sweetness into an answering look. Major Marsden's eyes, however, only narrowed with perplexed enquiry as he said bluntly, "Yes, slightly."

"Then perhaps father sent you to fetch me?"

This time he relaxed; confidence is catching. "I'm afraid not; but possibly if he had known I was to be here he might. At all events I can make myself useful."

"How?"

"I can get you a *gharri* — that is a carriage — and start you for Faizapore. It is sixty miles from here as you know."

She bent down to pick up her rugs. "I did not know. You see I expected father."

Philip Marsden felt impelled to consolation. "He has been delayed. Most likely there has been" — in his haste to put forward a solid excuse he was just about to say "an accident," but floundered instead into a bald "something to detain him."

"There generally *is* something to detain one in

every delay, isn't there?" she asked dryly; adding hastily, "but it is very kind of you to help. You see I have only just arrived in India, so I am quite a stranger."

"People generally *are* strangers when they first arrive in a new country aren't they?" retorted her companion grimly. Then as his eyes met her smiling ones, he smiled too and asked with a kinder ring in his voice, if there were anything else he could do for her.

"I'm *so* hungry," she said simply. "Couldn't you take me to get breakfast somewhere? I don't see a refreshment-room, and I hate going by myself."

"There is the *dâk* bungalow, but," he hesitated for an instant and stood looking at her, as if making up his mind about something; then calling some coolies he bade them take up the luggage. "This way please, Miss Stuart; you will have to walk about half a mile, but you won't mind that either, I expect."

In reply she launched out, as they went along the dusty road, into girlish chatter about the distances she could go without fatigue, the country life at home which seemed so very far off now, and the new existence on which she was just entering.

"You are not in the least like your sisters," he said suddenly.

She laughed. "They aren't my real sisters, you

see. Father married again, and they are my step-mother's children. There are five of them — three girls and two boys, besides Charlie who is only six years old — but then he is my brother — my half-brother I mean. It's very funny, isn't it? to have so many brothers and a mother one has never seen. But of course I have their photographs."

He said he was glad of that; yet when he had seen her safely started at breakfast, he retired to the verandah under excuse of a cigar, and found fault with Providence. Briefly, he knew too much of the reality, not to make poor Belle's anticipations somewhat of a ghastly mockery. "Poor child," he thought, "how much easier life would be to some of us, if like Topsy, we growed. What business has that girl's father to be a disreputable scamp? For the matter of that what business has a disreputable scamp to be any girl's father? It's the old problem."

Belle meanwhile eating her breakfast with youthful appetite felt no qualms. Life to her was at its brightest moment. This coming out to India in order to rejoin her father had been the Hegira of her existence, with reference to which all smaller events had to be classified. His approval or disapproval had been her standard of right and wrong, his mind and body her model of human perfection; and so far distance had enabled Colonel Stuart to

do justice to this pedestal; for it is easy to touch perfection in a letter, especially when it only extends to one sheet of creamlaid note-paper. Most of us have sufficient principal for such a small dividend.

"I knew father had not forgotten," she said calmly, when an abject badge-wearer was discovered asleep under a castor-oil bush, and proved to be the bearer of a note addressed in the familiar bold flourish to Miss Belle Stuart. "You see he had made all the arrangements, and I am not to start till the heat of the day is over."

"Then I will resign my charge, and say good-bye."

When they had shaken hands he went round to the other verandah where her baggage lay, and looked at the wooden box. Was it a wedding-cake? Even that might be better than life in the home to which she was going, though, for all he knew, the latter might suit her admirably. Then he went and kicked his heels at the station in order to be out of the way, for the bungalow only boasted one room.

CHAPTER II.

THE dawn of another day was just breaking, when the rattle and clatter which had formed an accompaniment to Belle's wakeful dreams all night long, ceased at the last stage out from Faizapore. Belle stepped out of the *palki-gharri* to stretch her cramped limbs, and looked round her with eyes in which sleep still lingered.

A mud village lay close to the road, and from an outlying hut the ponies, destined to convey her the remaining five miles, struggled forth reluctantly. The coachman was furtively pulling at some one else's pipe; a naked anatomy, halt and blind of an eye, dribbled water from an earthen pot over the hot axles; two early travellers were bathing in a pool of dirty water. Belle standing in the middle of the glaring white highway, instinctively turned to where, in the distance, a slender church-spire rose above the bank of trees on the horizon. *That* was familiar! — *that* she understood. Born in India, and therefore a daughter of the soil, she could not have been further removed in taste and feeling from the toiling self-centred cosmogony of the Indian village in which she stood, had she dropped into it

from another planet. So, alien in heart, she passed through the tide of life which sets every morning towards a great cantonment, looking on it as on some strange, new picture. Beyond all this, among people who ate with forks and spoons and went to church on Sundays, lay the life of which she had dreamed for years. The rest was a picturesque background; that was all.

A final flourish of an excruciating horn, gateposts guiltless of gates, a ragged privet hedge curving intermittently to a bright blue house set haphazard, cornerwise, in a square dusty expanse, — and the journey was over.

It was not only her cramped limbs that made Belle feel weak and unsteady as she stood before the seemingly deserted house. Suddenly, from behind a projecting corner, came a wrinkled beldame clad in dingy white bordered with red. With one hand she grasped a skinny child dressed in flannel night garments of Macgregor tartan, with the other she held up her draggling petticoats and salaamed profusely, thus displaying a pair of bandy, blue-trousered legs.

Belle looked at her with distinct aversion. "I think I have made a mistake," she said; "this can't be Colonel Stuart's house."

The woman grinned from ear to ear. "Ar'l right, missy *ba. Mem sahib* comin'. This b'y sonny *baba.*" She broke in on the whining wail of her

voice (which made Belle think of a professional beggar) to apostrophise her charge with loud-tongued abuse for not saying good morning to his "sissy."

Belle gasped. Could this dirty dark boy be her brother Charlie? Then a sudden rush of pity for the little fellow whose big black eyes met hers with such distrust, made her stoop to kiss him. But the child, reluctant and alarmed, struck at her face with his lean brown fingers and then fled into the house howling, followed full tilt by his aged attendant.

Belle would have felt inclined to cry, if the very unexpectedness of the attack, joined to the sight of the *ayah's* little bandy legs in hot pursuit, had not roused her ever-ready sense of humour. She laughed instead, and in so doing showed that she could hold her own with life; for no one throws up the sponge until the faculty of coming up smiling, even at one's own discomfiture, has been lost. And while she laughed, a new voice asserted itself above the howls within; a voice with, to Belle's ears, a strangely novel intonation, soft yet distinctly *staccato*, sharpening the vowels, clipping the consonants, and rising in pitch at the end of each sentence. It heralded the advent of a tall, stout lady in a limp cotton wrapper, who straightway took Belle to a languidly-effusive embrace, while she

poured out an even flow of wonderings, delights, and endearments. The girl, with the reserve taught by long years of homelessness, felt embarrassed at the warm kisses and tepid tears showered upon her; then, ashamed of her own unresponsiveness, tried hard to realise that this was really the great event, — the homecoming to which she had looked forward ever since she could remember. She felt vexed with herself, annoyed at her own failure to reach high pressure point. Yet she was not conscious of disappointment, and gave herself up willingly to the voluble welcomes of three slender, dark-eyed girls, who presently came running in, clad like their mother in limp cotton wrappers. They sat beside her on the bare string bed in the bare room which looked so cheerless to Belle's English eyes, and chattered, fluttered, and pecked at her with little kisses, like a group of birds on a branch.

Mrs. Stuart was meanwhile drying her ready tears on a coarse, highly-scented pocket handkerchief, giving orders for boundless refreshments, and expressing her joy in alternate English and Hindustani. Belle, beset on all sides by novelty, found it difficult to recognise which language was being spoken, so little change was there in voice or inflection. At last, amid the babel of words and embraces, she managed to enquire for her father. The question produced a sudden gravity, as if some

sacred subject had been introduced. In after years she recognised this extreme deference to the housemaster as typical of the mixed race, but at the time, it made her heart beat with a sudden fear of evil.

"Colonel Stuart is very well, thank you," replied her stepmother, showing a distinct tendency to reproduce the coarse handkerchief. "He will, I am sure, be very pleased to see you; — indeed that is one reason why I am glad myself. Though, of course, I welcome you for your own sake too, my darling girl. I am only a stepmother, I know, but I will allow no difference between you and my own three. So I told the mess-president yesterday — 'My daughters cannot go to your ball, Captain Jenkins,' I said, 'unless Belle goes also.' So, of course, he sent you an invitation." Mrs. Stuart had a habit of saying "of course" as if she agreed plaintively with the decrees of Providence.

"But when" — began Belle, her mind far from balls.

"To-night," chorused the three girls; a chorus followed by voluble solos adjuring her to put on her smartest frock, because all the men were frantic to see the original of the photograph which, it appeared, had been duly handed round for inspection and admiration. Belle neither blushed nor felt indignant; her face fell however when she found that her father would not be up for another two hours,

but the bated breath with which they spoke of his morning sleep prevented her from rebellion. Those two hours seemed an eternity, and as she sat waiting for him in the dim drawing-room, her heart beat with almost sickening force at each sound.

Unconscious as yet of disappointment, of anything save not unpleasant surprise, she still was conscious of an almost pathetic insistence that father *must* be the father of her dreams.

A mellow voice from the window calling her by name startled her from her watch by the door. She turned, to see a tall figure in scarlet and gold standing against the light which glittered on a trailing sword.

There was no doubt this time. With a cry of "Father? oh yes, you are father!" she was in his arms. To him also came the re-incarnation of a half-forgotten dream. The fair, slim, white-robed girl standing in the dim shadows, made the years vanish and youth return. "Good God, child, how like you are to your poor mother!" he faltered, and the ring in his voice made his daughter feel as if life held no more content.

Despite years of dissipation Colonel Stuart was still a singularly fine-looking man; well set up, and if a trifle fat in his dressing-gown, no more than portly in a tightly-buttoned tunic. He had always had a magnificent way with women, a sort of mas-

terful politeness, a beautiful overbearing condescension, which the majority of the sex described as the sweetest of manners. And now, inspired by his little girl's undisguised admiration, he excelled himself, discoursing on his delight in having her with him, and on the impossibility of thanking Heaven sufficiently for the care it had taken of her. On this last point he spoke in the same terms that he was accustomed to use towards his hostess at the conclusion of a visit; that is to say, with the underlying conviction that she had only done her duty. He drew a touching picture of his own forlornness, when, as a matter of fact, the very thought of her had passed so completely out of his life, that her death would only have caused an unreal regret. His eloquence however brought conviction to himself. So, to all intents and purposes, he became a fond father, because he felt as if he had been one. After all, Belle, even had she known the truth, would have no real cause for distress. We have no lien on the past of another, or on the future either; the present is all we can claim, and that only to a certain limited extent.

In truth it would have required little self-deception to convince any one that Belle had always been an abiding factor in life. She was a daughter any man might well have been proud to possess. Tall and straight, clear-eyed and bright, with wholesome

thoughts and tastes expressed in every feature. As she brought a cup of tea to her father, her face alight with pleasure, her eyes brilliant with happiness, she looked the picture of all an English girl ought to be.

"Thank you, my dear," said the Colonel viewing the offering dubiously. "I think, — I mean, — I should prefer a peg, — a B. and S., — a brandy and soda. The fact is I had a confounded bad night, and it might do me good, you know."

He was faintly surprised at finding himself making excuses for what was a daily habit; but it was delightful to bask in the tender solicitude of Belle's grey eyes, as he poured out, and drank the dose with an air of accurate virtue. Once more he imposed on himself; on every one in fact but the servant, who, with the forethought of laziness, sat outside with the brandy-bottle lest he should be summoned again. And when, finally, the Colonel rode off to his committee on his big Australian charger, Belle thought the world could never have contained a more magnificently martial figure. That this gorgeous apparition should condescend to wave its hand to her at the gate, was at once so bewildering and so natural, that all lesser details faded into insignificance before this astounding realisation of her dreams.

This was fortunate, for many were the readjustments necessary ere the day was over. Breakfast, where Belle sat blissfully at her father's side, re-

vealed two handsome, overdressed young men redolent of scent and sleek as to hair. These the Miss Van Milders, still in rumpled wrappers, introduced as their brothers Walter and Stanley, adding by no means covert chaff about "store clothes," whereat the young fellows giggled like girls, and Belle became almost aggressively sisterly in her manner. Walter was in tea, or rather had been so; as the plantation appeared to be undergoing transmutation into a limited Company, in order, Belle was told, to produce a dividend. Stanley was reading for some examination, after which somebody was to do something for him. It was all very voluble and vague. Meanwhile they stayed at home quite contentedly; satisfied to lounge about, play tennis, and keep a tame mongoose.

Towards the end of the meal, however, a red-haired youth slouched into the room, thrust an unwilling hand into Belle's when introduced as "your cousin Dick," and then sat down in silence with all the open awkwardness of an English schoolboy. Afterwards, whenever Belle's cool grey eyes wandered to that corner, they met a pair of fiery brown ones also on the reconnoitre.

Besides these present relations there were others constantly cropping up in conversation; and of them Belle had enough ere the day was done. The young men chattered over their cigarettes on the verandah;

the girls chattered over Belle's boxes, which they insisted on unpacking at once; Mrs. Stuart chattered of, and to her servants. It was a relief when, after luncheon, the whole house settled into the silence of siesta, though Belle herself was far too excited to rest.

Dinner brought a bitter disappointment in Colonel Stuart's absence; for she had excused herself from the ball on plea of fatigue, in the hopes of an evening with her father. It was Cousin Dick who, as they sat down to table, answered the expectation in Belle's face. "The Colonel never dines on ball nights, he goes to mess. You see, the girls bobbing up and down annoy him, and it *is* beastly to see people bolting their food in curl-papers."

"I'd speak grammar if I were you," retorted Mildred Van Milder, flushing up. Her fringe was a perpetual weariness to her, sometimes demanding the sacrifice of a dance in order to allow hair-curlers to do their perfect work.

"And I wouldn't wear a fringe like a poodle," growled Dick; whereat Mrs. Stuart plaintively wondered whence he got his manners, and wished he was more like her own boys.

Poodles or no poodles, when the dancing-party appeared ready for the fray, Belle could hardly believe her eyes. The sallow-faced girls of the morning in their limp cotton wrappers were replaced

by admirable copies of the latest French fashion-prints. Their elaborately-dressed hair, large dark eyes, and cream-coloured skins (to which art had lent a soft bloom denied by nature under Indian skies), joined to the perfect fit of their gowns, compelled attention. Indeed, when Maud, to try the stability of a shoe, waltzed round the room with her brother, Belle was startled at her own admiration for their lithe, graceful, sensuous beauty.

"I'll tell you what it is," cried Mabel, the eldest of the three; "you'll have a ripping good time to-night, Maudie. I never saw you look so cheek." She meant *chic*, but the spelling was against her. As for Mrs. Stuart, she appeared correctly attired in black satin and bugles. The girls saw to that, suppressing with inexorable firmness the good lady's hankering after gayer colours and more flimsy stuffs.

Left alone with Cousin Dick, Belle pretended to read, while in reality she was all ears for the sound of returning wheels. It was nearly ten o'clock, and, to her simple imagination, time for her father to come home. The clock struck, and Dick, who had been immersed in a book at the further corner of the room, laid it aside, and bringing out a chess-board began to set the men. He paused, frowned, passed both hands through his rough red hair, and finally asked abruptly if she played. A brief negative made him shift the pieces rapidly to a problem,

and no more was said. Again the clock struck, and this time Dick came and stood before her. He was a middle-sized, broad-shouldered youth about her own age, with a promise of strength in face and figure. "You had better go to bed," he said still more abruptly. "The Colonel won't be home till morning. It isn't a bit of good your waiting for him."

This was the second time that he had stepped in to her thoughts, as it were, and Belle resented the intrusion. "Don't let me keep you up," she replied. "I'd just as soon be alone."

"Then you'll have your wish, I expect," he answered coolly, as he swept the chessmen together and left the room.

Some two hours after Belle woke from sleep to the sound of an impatient voice. "Bearer! Bearer! *peg lao*, quick! Hang it all, Raby! you must, you shall stop and give me my revenge. You've the most cursed good luck —"

"Father!" She rose from her chair with cheeks flushed like those of a newly-awakened child. The tall, fair young man who stood beside Colonel Stuart turned at the sound of her voice, then touched his companion on the arm. "Some one is speaking to you."

"God bless my soul, child! I thought you were at the ball. Why didn't you go?" His tone was

kind, if a little husky, and he stretched a trembling hand towards her.

"I waited to see you, father," she replied, laying hers on his arm with a touch which was a caress.

The tall young man smiled to himself. "Will you not introduce me to your daughter, Colonel?" he said with a half-familiar bow towards Belle.

Colonel Stuart looked from one to the other as if he had never seen either of them before. "Introduce you, — why not? Belle, this is John Raby: a fellow who has the most infernal good luck in creation."

"I have no inclination to deny the fact at *this* moment," interposed the other, bowing again.

The implied compliment was quite lost on Belle, whose eyes and ears were for her father only. "I waited for you," she said with a little joyous laugh, "and fell asleep in my chair!"

Once more the Colonel looked from one to the other. The mere fact of his daughter's presence was in his present state confusing, but that she should have been waiting for him was bewildering in the extreme. How many years ago was it that another slim girl in white had gazed on him with similar adoration?

"You had better go to bed now," he said with almost supernatural profundity. "Good night. God bless you."

"Let me stay, please, father. I'm not a bit tired," she pleaded.

He stood uncertain, and John Raby drew out his watch with a contemptuous smile. "Half-past one, Colonel; I must be off."

"Hang it all!" expostulated the other feebly. "You can't go without my revenge. It ain't fair!"

"You shall have it sometime, never fear. Good night, Miss Stuart; we can't afford to peril such roses by late hours."

Again his words fell flat, their only result being that he looked at her with a flash of real interest. When he had gone Belle knelt beside her father's chair, timidly asking if he was angry with her for sitting up.

"Angry!" cried the Colonel, already in a half doze. "No, child! certainly not. Dear! dear! how like you are to your poor mother." The thought roused him, for he stood up shaking his head mournfully. "Go to bed, my dear. We all need rest. It has been a trying day, a very trying day."

Belle, as she laid her head on the pillow, felt that it had been so indeed; yet she was not disappointed with it. She was too young to criticise kindness, and they had all been kind, very kind; even Charlie had forgotten his first fright; and so she fell asleep, smiling at the remembrance of the old *ayah's* bandy legs.

CHAPTER III.

EARLY morning in the big bazaar at Faizapore. So much can be said; but who with pen alone could paint the scene, or who with brush give the aroma, physical and moral, which, to those familiar with the life of Indian streets, remains for ever the one indelible memory? The mysterious smell indescribable to those who know not the East; the air of sordid money-getting and giving which pervades even the children; the gaily-dressed, chattering stream of people drifting by; but from the grey-bearded cultivator come on a lawsuit from his village, to the sweeper, besom in hand, propelling the black flood along the gutter, the only subject sufficiently interesting to raise one voice above the universal hum, is money. Even the stalwart herdswomen with their kilted skirts swaying at each free bold step, their patchwork bodices obeying laws of decency antipodal to ours, even they, born and bred in the desert, talk noisily of the *ghee* they are bringing to market in the russet and black jars poised on their heads; and if *ghee* be not actually money, it is inextricably mixed up with it in the native mind.

All else may fade from the memory; the glare of

sunlight, the transparent shadows, the clustering flies and children round the cavernous sweetmeat-shops, the glitter of brazen pots, and the rainbow-hued overflow from the dyers' vats staining the streets like a reflection of the many-tinted cloths festooned to dry overhead. Even the sharper contrasts of the scene may be forgotten; the marriage procession swerving to give way to the quiet dead, swathed in muslins and bound with tinsel, carried high on the string bed, or awaiting sunset and burial in some narrow by-way among green-gold melons and piles of red wheat. But to those who have known an Indian bazaar well, the chink of money, and the smell of a chemist's shop, will ever remain a more potent spell to awaken memory than any elaborate pictures made by pen or pencil.

On this particular morning quite a little crowd was collected round the doorway leading to the house of one Shunker Dâs, usurer, contractor, and honorary magistrate; a man who combined those three occupations into one unceasing manufacture of money. In his hands pice turned to annas, annas to rupees, and rupees in their turn to fat. For there is no little truth in the assertion that the real test of a *buniah's* (money-lender's) wealth is his weight, and the safest guard for income-tax his girth in inches.

Nevertheless a skeleton lay hidden under Shunker

Dâs's mountain of prosperous flesh; a gruesome skeleton whose bones rattled ominously. Between him and the perdition of a sonless death stood but one life; a life so frail that it had only been saved hitherto by the expedient of dressing the priceless boy in petticoats, and so palming him off on the dread Shiva as a girl. At least so said the *zenana* women, and so in his inmost heart thought Shunker Dâs, though he was a prime specimen of enlightened native society. But on that day the fateful first decade during which the Destroyer had reft away so many baby-heirs from the usurer's home was over; and amid countless ceremonies, and much dispensation of alms, the little Nuttu, with his ears and nose pierced like a girl's, had been attired in the *pugree* and *pyjamas* of his sex. Hence the crowd closing in round the Lâlâ's Calcutta-built barouche which waited for its owner to come out. Hence the number of professional beggars, looking on the whole more fat and well-liking than the workers around them, certainly more so than a small group of women who were peeping charily from the door of the next house, — a very different house from Lâlâ Shunker Dâs's pretentious stucco erection with its blue elephants and mottled tigers frescoed round the top storey, and a railway train, flanked by two caricatures of the British soldier, over the courtyard doorway. This was a tall, square, colourless tower,

gaining its only relief from the numerous places where the outer skin of bricks had fallen away, disclosing the hard red mortar beneath; mortar that was stronger than stone; mortar that had been ground and spread long years before the word "contractor" was a power in India. Here in poverty, abject in all save honour, dwelt Mahomed Lateef, a Syyed of the Syyeds;[1] and it was his hewers of wood and drawers of water who formed the group at the door, turning their lean faces away disdainfully when the baskets of dough cakes, and trays of sweet rice were brought out for distribution from the idolater's house.

The crowd thickened, but fell away instinctively to give place to a couple of English soldiers who came tramping along shoulder to shoulder, utterly unconcerned and unsympathetic; their Glengarry caps set at the same angle, the very pipes in their mouths having a drilled appearance. Such a quiet, orderly crowd it was; not even becoming audible when Shunker Dâs appeared with little Nuttu, the hero of the day, who in a coat of the same brocade as his father's, and a *pugree* tied in the same fashion, looked a wizened, changeling double of his unwieldy companion. The barouche was brilliant as to varnish, vivid as to red linings, and the bay Australians were the best money could buy; yet the people, as

[1] A lineal descendant of the Prophet.

it passed, took small notice of the Lâlâ, lolling in gorgeous attire against the Berlin-wool-worked cushion which he had bought from the Commissioner's wife at a bazaar in aid of a cathedral. They gave far more attention to a hawk-eyed old man with a cruel, high-bred face, who rode by on a miserable pony, and after returning the Lâlâ's contemptuous salutation with grave dignity, spat solemnly into the gutter.

This was Mahomed Lateef, who but the day before had put the talisman-signet on his right hand to a deed mortgaging the last acre of his ancestral estate to the usurer. Yet the people stood up with respectful *salaams* to him, while they had only obsequious grins for the other. Indeed, one old patriarch waiting for death in the sun, curled up comfortably, his chin upon his knees, on a bed stuck well into the street, nodded his head cheerfully and muttered "Shunker's father was nobody," over and over again till he fell asleep; to dream perchance of the old order of things.

Meanwhile the Lâlâ waited his turn for audience at the District Officer's bungalow. There were many other aspirants to that honour, seated on a row of cane-bottomed chairs in the verandah, silent, bored, uncomfortable. It is an irony of fate which elevates the chair in India into a patent of position, for nowhere does the native look more thoroughly

out of place than in the coveted honour. As it is he clings to it, notably with his legs; those thin legs round whose painful want of contour the tight cotton pantaloons wrinkle all too closely, and which would be so much better tucked away under dignified skirts in true Eastern fashion. But the exotic has a strange fascination for humanity. Waiting there for his turn, the Lâlâ inwardly cursed the Western morality which prevented an immediate and bribe-won entry; but the red-coated badge-wearers knew better than to allow even a munificent shoe-money to interfere with the roster. The harassed-looking, preoccupied official within had an almost uncanny quickness of perception, so the rupees chinked into their pockets, but produced no effect beyond whining voices and fulsome flattery.

"Well, Lâlâ-ji! and what do *you* want?" asked the representative of British majesty when, at last, Shunker Dâs's most obsequious smile curled out over his fat face. There was no doubt a certain brutality of directness in the salutation, but it came from a deadly conviction that a request lay at the bottom of every interview, and that duty bade its discovery without delay. The abruptness of the magistrate was therefore compressed politeness. As he laid down the pen with which he had been writing a judgment, and leant wearily back in his chair,

his bald head was framed, as it were, in a square nimbus formed by a poster on the wall behind. It was four feet square, and held, in treble columns, a list of all the schedules and reports due from his office during the year to come. That was his patent of position; and it was one which grows visibly, as day by day, and month by month, law and order become of more consequence than truth and equity in the government of India.

The Lâlâ's tact bade him follow the lead given. "I want, *sahib*," he said, "to be made a *Rai Bâhâdur*."

Now *Rai Bâhâdur* is an honorific title bestowed by Government for distinguished service to the State. So without more ado Shunker Dâs detailed his own virtues, totalled up the money expended in public utility, and wound up with an offer of five thousand rupees towards a new Female Hospital. The representative of British majesty drew diagrams on his blotting-paper, and remarked, casually, that he would certainly convey the Lâlâ's liberal suggestion about the hospital to the proper authorities; adding his belief that one Puras Râm, who was about to receive the coveted honour, had offered fifteen thousand for the same purpose.

"I will give ten thousand, *Huzoor*," bid the usurer, with a scowl struggling with his smile; "that will make seventy-five thousand in all; and

Tôta Mull got it for building the big tank that won't hold water. If it cost him fifty thousand, may I eat dirt; and I ought to know for I had the contract. It won't last, *Huzoor;* I know the stuff that went into it."

"Tôta Mull had other services."

"Other services!" echoed Shunker fumbling in his garments, and producing a printed book tied up in a cotton handkerchief. "See my certificates; one from your honour's own hand."

Perhaps the District Officer judged the worth of the others by the measure of his own testimonial, wherein, being then a "griff" of six months' standing, he had recorded Shunker's name opposite a list of the cardinal virtues, for he set the book aside with a sad smile. Most likely he was thinking that in those days his ambition had been a reality, and his liver an idea, and that now they had changed places. "I am glad to see your son looking so well," he remarked with pointed irrelevance. "I hear you are to marry him next month, and that everything is to be on a magnificent scale. Tôta Mull will be quite eclipsed; though his boy's wedding cost him sixty-five thousand,—he told me so himself. Accept my best wishes on the occasion."

"*Huzoor!* I will give fifteen thou—" British majesty rose gravely with the usual intimation of

dismissal, and a remark that it was always gratified at liberality. Shunker Dâs left the presence with his smile thoroughly replaced by a scowl, though his going there had simply been an attempt to save his pocket; for he knew right well that he had not yet filled up the measure of qualification for a *Rai Bâhâdur*-ship.

While this interview had been going on, another of a very different nature was taking place outside a bungalow on the other side of the road, where Philip Marsden stood holding the rein of his charger and talking to Mahomed Lateef, whose pink-nosed pony was tied to a neighbouring tree.

The old man, in faded green turban and shawl, showed straight and tall even beside the younger man's height and soldierly carriage. "*Sahib*," he said, "I am no beggar to whine at the feet of a stranger for alms. I don't know the *sahib* over yonder whose verandah, as you see, is crowded with such folk. They come and go too fast these *sahibs*, nowadays; and I am too old to tell the story of my birth. If it is forgotten, it is forgotten. But you know me, Allah be praised! You feel my son's blood there on your heart where he fell fighting beside you! Which of the three was it? What matter? They all died fighting. And this one is Benjamin; I cannot let him go. He is a bright boy, and will give brains, not blood, to the Sirkar,

if I can only get employment for him. So I come to you, who know me and mine."

Philip Marsden laid his hand on the old man's shoulder. "That is true. Khân *sahib*. What is it I can do for you?"

"There is a post vacant in the office, *Huzoor!* It is not much, but a small thing is a great gain in our poor house. The boy could stay at home, and not see the women starve. It is only writing-work, and thanks to the old mullah, Murghub Admed is a real *khush nawis* (penman). Persian and Arabic, too, and Euclidus, and Algebra; all a true man should know. If you would ask the *sahib*."

"I'll go over now. No, no, *Khân sahib!* I am too young, and you are too old."

But Mahomed Lateef held the stirrup stoutly with lean brown fingers. "The old help the young into the saddle always, *sahib*. It is for you boys to fight now, and for us to watch and cry 'Allah be with the brave!'"

So it happened that as Shunker Dâs drove out of the District Officer's compound, Major Marsden rode in. Despite his scowl, the usurer stood up and *salaamed* profusely with both hands, receiving a curt salute in return.

British majesty was now in the verandah disposing of the smaller fry in batches. "Come inside," it said, hastily dismissing the final lot. "I've only

ten minutes left for bath and breakfast, but you'll find a cigar there, and we can talk while I tub."

Amid vigorous splashings from within Major Marsden unfolded his mission, receiving in reply a somewhat disjointed enquiry as to whether the applicant had passed the Middle School examination, for otherwise his case was hopeless.

"And why, in Heaven's name?" asked his hearer impatiently.

The magistrate having finished his ablutions appeared at the door in scanty attire rubbing his bald head with a towel. "Immutable decree of government."

"And loyalty, family, influence — what of them?"

A shrug of the shoulders, — "Ask some one else. I am only a barrel-organ grinding out the executive and judicial tunes sent down from headquarters."

"And a lively discord you'll make of it in time! But you are wrong. A man in your position is, as it were, trustee to a minor's estate and bound to speak up for his wards."

"And be over-ridden! No good! I've tried it. Oh lord! twelve o'clock and I had a case with five pleaders in it at half-past eleven. Well, I'll bet the four-anna bit the exchange left me from last month's pay, that my judgment will be upset on appeal."

"I pity you profoundly."

"Don't mention it; there's balm in Gilead. This is mail-day, and I shall hear from my wife and the kids. Good-bye! — I'm sorry about the boy, but it can't be helped."

"It strikes me it will have to be helped some day," replied Major Marsden as he rode off.

Meanwhile a third interview, fraught with grave consequences to this story, had just taken place in the Commissariat office whither Shunker Dâs had driven immediately after his rebuff, with the intention of robbing Peter to pay Paul; in other words, of getting hold of some Government contract, out of which he could squeeze the extra rupees required for the purchase of the *Rai Bâhâdur*-ship; a proceeding which commended itself to his revengeful and spiteful brain. As it so happened, he appeared in the very nick of time; for he found Colonel Stuart looking helplessly at a telegram from headquarters, ordering him to forward five hundred camels to the front at once.

Now the Faizapore office sent in the daily schedules, original, duplicate, and triplicate, with commendable regularity, and drew the exact amount of grain sanctioned for transport animals without fail; nevertheless a sudden demand on its resources was disagreeable. So, as he had done once or twice before in this time of war and rumours of wars, the chief turned to the big contractor for help; not

without a certain uneasiness, for though a long course of shady transactions had blunted Colonel Stuart's sense of honour towards his equals, it had survived to an altogether illogical extent towards his inferiors. Now his private indebtedness to the usurer was so great that he could not afford to quarrel with him; and this knowledge nurtured a suspicion that Shunker Dâs made a tool of him, an idea most distasteful both to pride and honour. No mental position is more difficult to analyse than that of a man, who having lost the desire to do the right from a higher motive, clings to it from a lower one. Belle's father, for instance, did not hesitate to borrow cash from monies intrusted to his care; but he would rather not have borrowed it from a man with whom he had official dealings.

Shunker Dâs, however, knew nothing, and had he known would have credited little, of this survival of honour. It seemed impossible in his eyes that the innumerable dishonesties of the Faizapore office could exist without the knowledge of its chief. Bribery was to him no crime; nor is it one to a very large proportion of the people of India. To the ignorant, indeed, it seems such a mere detail of daily life that it is hard for them to believe in judicial honesty. Hence the ease with which minor officials extort large sums on pretence of carrying the bribe to the right quarter; and hence again

comes, no doubt, many a whispered tale of corruption in high places.

"I shall lose by this contract, *sahib*," said the Lâlâ when the terms had been arranged; "but I rely on your honour's generous aid in the future. There are big things coming in, when the Protector of the Poor will doubtless remember his old servant, whose life and goods are always at your honour's disposal."

"I have the highest opinion of, — of your integrity, Lâlâ *sahib*," replied the Colonel evasively, "and of course shall take it, — I mean your previous services — into consideration, whenever it — it is possible to do so." The word integrity had made him collapse a little, but ere the end of the sentence he had recovered his self-esteem, and with it his pomposity.

The Lâlâ's crafty face expanded into a smile. "We understand each other, *sahib*, and if — !" here he dropped his voice to a confidential pitch.

Five minutes after Colonel Stuart's debts had increased by a thousand rupees, and the Lâlâ was carefully putting away a duly stamped and signed I.O.U. in his pocket-book; not that he assigned any value to it, but because it was part of the game. Without any distinct idea of treachery, he always felt that Lukshmi, the goddess of Fortune, had given him one more security against discomfiture

when he managed to have the same date on a contract and a note of hand. Not that he anticipated discomfiture either. In fact, had any one told him that he and the Colonel were playing at cross-purposes, he would have laughed the assertion to scorn. He had too high an opinion of the perspicacity of the *sahib-logue*, and especially of the *sahib* who shut his eyes to so many irregularities, to credit such a possibility.

So he drove homewards elate, and on the way was stopped in a narrow alley by an invertebrate crowd, which, without any backbone of resistance, blocked all passage, despite the abuse he showered around. "Run over the pigs! Drive on, I say," he shouted to the driver, when other means failed.

"Best not, Shunker," sneered a little gold-earringed Rajpoot amongst the crowd, "there's a sepoy in yonder shooting free."

The Lâlâ sank back among his cushions, green with fear. At the same moment an officer in undress uniform rode up as if the street were empty, the crowd making way before him. "What is it, *havildar* (sergeant)?" he asked sharply, reining up before an open door where a sentry stood with rifle ready.

"Private Afzul Khân run amuck, *Huzoor!*"

Major Marsden threw himself from his horse and looked through the door into the little court within.

It was empty, but an archway at right angles led to an inner yard. "When?"

"Half an hour gone — the guard will be here directly, *Huzoor!* They were teasing him for being an Afghan, and saying he would have to fight his own people."

"Any one hurt?"

"Jeswunt Rai and Gurdit Singh, not badly; he has seven rounds left, *sahib*, and swears he won't be taken alive."

The last remark came hastily, as Major Marsden stepped inside the doorway. He paused, not to consider, but because the tramp of soldiers at the double came down the street. "Draw up your men at three paces on either side of the door," he said to the native officer. "If you hear a shot, go on the house-top and fire on him as he sits. If he comes out alone, shoot him down."

"Allah be with the brave!" muttered one or two of the men, as Philip Marsden turned once more to enter the courtyard. It lay blazing in the sunshine, open and empty; but what of the dim archway tunnelling a row of buildings into that smaller yard beyond, where Afzul Khân waited with murder in his heart, and his finger on the trigger of his rifle? There the Englishman would need all his nerve. It was a rash attempt he was making; he knew that right well, but he had resolved to attempt it if ever

he got the opportunity. Anything, he had told himself, was better than the wild-beast-like scuffle he had witnessed not long before; a hopeless, insane struggle ending in death to three brave men, one of them the best soldier in the regiment. The remembrance of the horrible scene was strong on him as his spurs clicked an even measure across the court.

It was cooler in the shadow, quite a relief after the glare. Ah! . . . just as he had imagined! In the far corner a crouching figure and a glint of light on the barrel of a rifle. No pause; straight on into the sunlight again; then suddenly the word of command rang through the court boldly. "Lay down your arms!"

The familiar sound died away into silence. It was courage against power, and a life hung on the balance. Then the long gleam of light on the rifle wavered, disappeared, as Private Afzul Khân stood up and saluted. "You are a braver man than I, *sahib*," he said. That was all.

A sort of awed whisper of relief and amazement ran through the crowd as Philip Marsden came out with his prisoner, and gave orders for the men to fall in. Two Englishmen in mufti had ridden up in time for the final tableau; and one of them, nodding his head to the retreating soldiers, said approvingly, "That is what gave, and keeps us India."

"And that," returned John Raby pointing to

Shunker Dâs who with renewed arrogance was driving off, "will make us lose it."

"My dear Raby! I thought the moneyed classes —"

"My dear Smith! if you think that when the struggle comes, as come it must, our new nobility, whose patent is plunder, will fight our battles against the old, I don't."

They argued the point all the way home without convincing each other, while Time with the truth hidden in his wallet passed on towards the Future.

CHAPTER IV.

Had any one, a week before his daughter arrived, told Colonel Stuart that her presence would be a pleasant restraint upon him, he would have been very angry. Yet such was the fact. Her likeness to her mother carried him back to days when his peccadilloes could still be regarded as youthful follies, and people spared a harsh verdict on what age might be expected to remedy. Then her vast admiration gave a reality to his own assumptions of rectitude; for the Colonel clung theoretically to virtue with great tenacity, in a loud-voiced, conservative "d—— you if you don't believe what I say" sort of manner. He also maintained a high ideal in regard to the honour of every one else, based on a weak-kneed conviction that his own was above suspicion.

He was proud of Belle too, fully recognising that with her by his side his grey hairs became reverend. So he pulled himself up to some small degree, and began to sprinkle good advice among the younger men with edifying gravity. As for Belle she was supremely happy. No doubt had she been "earnest" or "soulful" or "intense" she might have found

spots on her sun with the greatest ease; but she was none of these things. At this period of her existence nothing was further from her disposition than inward questionings on any subject. She took life as she found it, seeing only her own healthy, happy desires in its dreary old problems, and remaining as utterly unconscious that she was assimilating herself to her surroundings as the caterpillar which takes its colour from the leaf on which it feeds. For a healthy mind acts towards small worries as the skin does towards friction; it protects itself from pain by an excess of vitality. It is only when pressure breaks through the blister that its extent is realised.

In good truth Belle's life was a merry one. The three girls were good-nature itself, especially when they found the new arrival possessed none of their own single-hearted desire for matrimony. Her stepmother, if anything, was over-considerate, being a trifle inclined to make a bugbear of the girl's superior claims to her father's affection. The housekeeping was lavishly good, and men of a certain stamp were not slow to avail themselves of the best mutton and prawn curry in Faizapore. Where the money came from which enabled the Stuarts to keep open house, they did not enquire. Neither did Belle, who knew no more about the value of things than a baby in arms. As for the Colonel, he had

long years before acquired the habit of looking on his debts as his principal, and treating his pay as the interest. So matters went smoothly and swiftly for the first month or so, during which time Belle might have been seen everywhere in the company of the three Miss Van Milders, cheerfully following their lead with a serene innocence that kept even the fastest of a very fast set in check. Once or twice she saw Philip Marsden, and was rallied by the girls on her acquaintance with that solitary misogynist. Mrs. Stuart, indeed, went so far as to ask him to dinner, even though he had not called, on the ground that he was the richest man in the station, and Belle's interests must not be neglected though she was only a stepdaughter. But he sent a polite refusal, and so the matter dropped; nor to Mrs. Stuart's open surprise did Belle make any other declared conquest.

Yet, unnoticed by all, there was some one, who long before the first month was out, would willingly have cut himself into little pieces in order to save his idol from the least breath of disappointment. So it was from Cousin Dick's superior knowledge of Indian life that Belle learnt many comforting, if curious excuses for things liable to ruffle even her calm of content.

Poor Dick! Hitherto his efforts in all directions had resulted in conspicuous failure; chiefly, odd

though it may seem, because he happened to be born under English instead of Indian skies. In other words, because he was not what bureaucracies term "a Statutory Native." His mother, Mrs. Stuart's younger sister, had run away with a young Englishman who, having ruined himself over a patent, was keeping soul and body together by driving engines. In some ways she might have done worse, for Smith senior was a gentleman; but he possessed, unfortunately, just that unstable spark of genius which, like a will-o'-the-wisp leads a man out of the beaten path without guiding him into another. The small sum of money she brought him was simply so much fuel to feed the flame; and, within a few months of their marriage, the soft, luxurious girl was weeping her eyes out in a miserable London lodging, while he went the rounds with his patent. There Dick was born, and thence after a year or two she brought them both back to the elastic house, the strong family affection, and lavish hospitality which characterise the Eurasian race. Not for long, however, since her husband died of heat-apoplexy while away seeking for employment, and she, after shedding many tears, succumbed to consumption brought on by the fogs and cold of the north. So, dependent on various uncles and aunts in turn, little Dick Smith had grown up with one rooted desire in the rough red head over which his sleek, soft guardians

shook theirs ominously. Briefly, he was to be an engineer like his father. He broke open everything to see how it worked, and made so many crucial experiments that the whole family yearned for the time when he should join the Government Engineering College at Roorkee. And then, just when this desirable consummation was within reach, some one up among the deodars at Simla, or in an office at Whitehall, invented the "Statutory Native," and there was an end of poor Dick's career; for a Statutory Native is a person born in India of parents habitually resident and domiciled in the country. True, the college was open to the boy for his training; but with all the Government appointments awarded to successful students closed to him by the accident of his birth, his guardians naturally shook their heads again over an expensive education which would leave him, practically, without hope of employment. For, outside Government service, engineers are not, as yet, wanted in India. He might, of course, had he been the son of a rich man, have been sent home to pass out as an Englishman through the English college. As it was the boy, rebellious to the heart's core, was set to other employment. Poor Dick! If his European birth militated against him on the one side, his Eurasian parentage condemned him on the other. After infinite trouble his relations got him a small post on

the railway, whence he was ousted on reduction; another with a private firm which became bankrupt. The lad's heart and brains were elsewhere, and as failure followed on failure, he gave way to fits of defiance, leading him by sheer excess of energy into low companionship and bad habits. At the time of Belle's arrival he was trying to work off steam as an unpaid clerk in his uncle's office when a boy's first love revolutionized his world; love at first sight, so enthralling, so compelling, that he did not even wonder at the change it wrought in him. Belle never knew, perhaps he himself did not recognise, how much of the calm content of those first few months was due to Dick's constant care. A silent, unreasoning devotion may seem a small thing viewed by the head, but it keeps the heart warm. Poor, homeless, rebellious Dick had never felt so happy, or so good, in all his life; and he would kneel down in his hitherto prayerless room and pray that she might be kept from sorrow, like any young saint. Yet he had an all-too-intimate acquaintance with the corruption of Indian towns, and an all-too-precocious knowledge of evil.

Belle in her turn liked him; there was something more congenial in his breezy, tempestuous, nature than in the sweetness of her stepbrothers, and unconsciously she soon learnt to come to him for comfort. "Charlie tells such dreadful stories," she

complained one day, "and he really is fond of whisky-and-water. I almost wish father wouldn't give him any."

"The governor thinks it good for him, I bet," returned Dick stoutly. "I believe it is sometimes. Then as for lies! I used to tell 'em myself; it's the climate. He'll grow out of it, you'll see; I did."

Now Dick's truthfulness was, as a rule, so uncompromising that Belle cheered up; as for the boy, his one object then was to keep care from those clear eyes; abstract truth was nowhere.

The next time Sonny *baba* was offered a sip from his father's glass, he refused hastily. Pressure produced a howl of terror; nor was it without the greatest difficulty that he was subsequently brought to own that Cousin Dick had threatened to kill him if he ever touched a "peg" again. Luckily for the peace of the household this confession was made in the Colonel's absence, when only Mrs. Stuart's high, strident voice could be raised in feeble anger. The culprit remained unrepentant; the more so because Belle assoilzied him, declaring that Charlie ought not to be allowed to touch the horrid mixture. Whereupon her stepmother sat and cried softly with the boy on her lap, making both Belle and Dick feel horribly guilty, until, the incident having occurred at lunch, both the sufferers fell asleep placidly. When Belle returned from her afternoon ride she

found Mrs. Stuart in high good humour, decanting a bottle of port wine. "You frightened me so, my dear," she said affectionately, "that I sent for the doctor, and he says port wine *is* better, so I'm glad you mentioned it." And Belle felt more guilty than ever.

These afternoon rides were Dick's only trouble. He hated the men who came about the house, and more especially the favoured many who were allowed to escort the "Van" as Belle's three stepsisters were nick-named. It made him feel hot and cold all over to think of her in the company which he found suitable enough for his cousins. But then it seemed to him as if no one was good enough for Belle, — he himself least of all. He dreamed wild, happy dreams of doing something brave, fine, and manly; not so much from any desire of thereby winning her, but because his own love demanded it imperiously. For the first time the needle of his compass pointed unhesitatingly to the pole of right. He confided these aspirations to the girl, and they would tell each other tales of heroism until their cheeks flushed, and their eyes flashed responsive to the deeds of which they talked. One day Dick came home full of the story of Major Marsden and the Afghan sepoy; and they agreed to admire it immensely. After that Dick made rather a hero of the Major, and Belle began to wonder why the tall quiet

man who had been so friendly at their first meeting, kept so persistently aloof from her and hers. He was busy, of course, but so were others, for these were stirring times. The arsenal was working over hours, and all through the night, long files of laden carts crept down the dusty roads, bearing stores for the front.

To all outward appearance, however, society took no heed of these wars or rumours of wars, but went on its way rejoicing in the winter climate which made amusement possible. And no one in the station rejoiced more than Belle. Major Marsden, watching her from afar, told himself that a girl who adopted her surroundings — and such surroundings! — so readily, was not to be pitied. She was evidently well able to take care of herself; yet, many a time, as he sat playing whist while others were dancing, he caught himself looking up to see who the partner might be with whom she was hurrying past to seek the cooler air of the gardens, where seats for two were dimly visible among the coloured lanterns.

For the most part, however, Belle's partners were boys, too young to have lost the faculty of recognising innocent unconsciousness. But one night at a large ball given to a departing regiment, she fell into the hands of a stranger who had come in from an outstation in order to continue a pronounced flirta-

tion which Maud Van Milder had permitted during a dull visit to a friend. That astute young lady having no intention of offending permanent partners for his sake, handed him over to Belle for a dance, and the latter, failing to fall in with his step during the first turn, pleaded fatigue as the easiest way of getting through the penance.

Philip at his whist, saw her pass down the corridor towards the garden; and, happening to know her companion, played a false card, lost the trick, and apologised.

"Time yet, if we look out," replied his partner; but this was exactly what the Major could not do, and the rubber coming swiftly to an end, he made an excuse for cutting out, and followed Belle into the garden, wondering who could have introduced her to such a man. To begin with he was not fit for decent society, and in addition he had evidently favoured the champagne. Philip had no definite purpose in his pursuit, until from a dark corner he heard Belle's clear young voice with a touch of hauteur in it. Then the impulse to get her away from her companion before he had a chance of making himself objectionable, came to the front, joined to an unexpected anger and annoyance.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, Miss Stuart. You are wanted," said Philip going up to them.

"Hallo, Marsden! what a beast you are to come just as we were gettin' confidential — weren't we?" exclaimed Belle's companion with what was meant to be a fascinating leer. She turned from one face to the other; but if the one aroused dislike and contempt, the air of authority in Major Marsden's touched her pride.

"Who wants me?" she asked calmly.

"Who!" echoed her partner. "Come, that's a good one! We both want you; don't we, Marsden?"

Luckily for the speaker Philip recognised his own imprudence in risking an altercation. The only thing to be done now, was to get the girl away as soon as possible.

"Exactly so;" he replied, crushing down his anger, "Miss Stuart can choose between us."

Belle rose superbly.

"You seem to forget I can go alone." And alone she went, while her partner shrieked with noisy laughter, avowing that he loved a spice of the devil in a girl.

Philip moodily chewing the end of his cheroot ere turning in felt that the rebuff served him right, though he could not restrain a smile as he thought of Belle's victorious retreat. By that time, however, subsequent facts had enlightened her as to Philip's possible meaning, and the sight of her former partner being inveigled away from waltzing to the billiard room by the senior subaltern, made

her turn so pale that John Raby, on whose arm she was leaning, thought she was afraid.

"He won't be allowed to come back, Miss Stuart," he said consolingly. "And I apologise in the name of the committee for the strength of the champagne."

Belle's mouth hardened. "There is no excuse for that sort of thing. There never can be one."

He looked at her curiously.

"I wouldn't say that, Miss Stuart. It is a mistake to be so stern. For my part I can forgive anything. It is an easy habit to acquire — and most convenient."

Belle, however, could not even forgive herself. She lay tossing about enacting the scene over and over again, wondering what Major Marsden must think of her. How foolish she had been! Why had she not trusted him? Why had he not made her understand?

Being unable to sleep, she rose, and long ere her usual hour was walking about the winding paths which intersected the barren desert of garden where nothing grew but privet and a few bushes of oleander. This barrenness was not Dame Nature's fault, for just over the other side of the wide white road John Raby's garden was ablaze with blossom. Trails of Maréchale Niel roses, heavy with great creamy cups, hung over the low hedge, and a sweet English

scent of clove-pinks and mignonette was wafted to her with every soft, fitful gust of wind. She felt desperately inclined to cross the intervening dust into this paradise, and stood quite a long time at the blue gate-posts wondering why a serpent seemed to have crept into her own Eden. The crow's long-drawn note came regularly from a *kuchnâr* tree that was sheeted with white geranium-like flowers; the Seven Brothers chattered noisily among the yellow tassels of the cassia, and over head, against the cloudless sky, a wedge-shaped flight of cranes was winging its way northward, all signs that the pleasant cold weather was about to give place to the fiery furnace of May; but Belle knew nothing of such things as yet, so the vague sense of coming evil, which lay heavily on her, seemed all the more depressing from its unreasonableness. A striped squirrel became inquisitive over her still figure and began inspection with bushy tail erect and short starts of advance, till it was scared by the clank of bangles and anklets as a group of Hindu women, bearing bunches of flowers and brazen *lotahs* of milk for Seetlâs' shrine, came down the road; beside them, in various stages of toddle, the little children for whom their mothers were about to beg immunity from small-pox. Of all this again Belle knew nothing; but suddenly, causelessly, it struck her for the first time that she ought to know something. Who

were these people? What were they doing? Where were they going? One small child paused to look at her and she smiled at him. The mother smiled in return, and the other women looked back half surprised, half pleased, nodding, and laughing as they went on their way.

Why? Belle, turning to enquire after the late breakfast, felt oppressed by her own ignorance. In the verandah she met the bearer coming out of the Colonel's window with a medicine bottle in his hand. Did her ignorance go so far that her father should be ill and she not know of it? "Budlu!" she asked hastily, "the Colonel *sahib* isn't ill, is he?"

The man, who had known her mother, and grown grey with his master, raised a submissive face. "No, missy *baba*, not ill. Colonel *sahib*, he drunk."

"Drunk!" she echoed mechanically, too astonished for horror. "What *do* you mean?"

"Too much wine drunk, — very bad," explained Budlu cheerfully.

She caught swiftly at the words with a sense of relief from she knew not what. "Ah, I see! the wine last night was bad, and disagreed with him?"

"Damn bad!" Budlu's English was limited but not choice. She remarked on it at the breakfast-table, repeating his words and laughing. None of the girls were down, but Walter and Stanley gig-

gled; and the latter was apparently about to say something facetious, when his words changed into an indignant request that Dick would look out, and keep his feet to himself.

"Was it you I kicked?" asked Dick innocently. "I thought it was the puppy." Then he went on fast as if in haste to change the subject: "I often wonder why you don't learn Hindustani, Belle. You'd be ashamed not to speak the lingo in other countries. Why not here? I'll teach you if you like."

"There's your chance, Belle!" sneered Stanley, still smarting from Dick's forcible method of ensuring silence. "He really is worth ten rupees a month as *moonshee*, and 'twill save the governor's pocket if it goes in the family."

An unkind speech, no doubt; yet it did good service to Dick by ensuring Belle's indignant defence, and her immediate acceptance of his offer; for she was ever ready of tongue, and swift of sympathy, against injustice or meanness.

So the little incident of the morning passed without her understanding it in the least. Nevertheless Dick found it harder and harder every day to manipulate facts, and to stand between his princess and the naked, indecent truth. Her curiosity in regard to many things had been aroused, and she asked more questions in the next four days than she had

asked in the previous four months; almost scandalizing the Van Milder clan by the interest she took in things of which they knew nothing. It was all very well, the girls said, if she intended to be a *zenana*-mission lady, but without that aim it seemed to them barely correct that she should know how many wives the *khansamah* (butler) had. As for the boys, they rallied her tremendously about her Hindustani studies, for, like most of their race, they prided themselves on possessing but a limited acquaintance with their mother tongue; Walter, indeed, being almost boastful over the fact that he had twice failed for the Higher Standard. Then the whole family chaffed her openly because she had a few sensible talks with John Raby, the young civilian; and when she began to show a certain weariness of pursuing pleasure in rear of the "Van," insisted that she must be in love with him without knowing it.

"I don't like Raby," said Mildred, the youngest and least artificial of the sisters. "Jack Carruthers told me the governor had been dropping a lot of money to him at *écarté*."

"I don't see what you and Mr. Carruthers have to do with father's amusements," flashed out Belle in swift anger. "I suppose he can afford it, and at least he never stints you, — I mean the family," she added hastily, fearing to be mean.

"Quite true, my dear! He's a real good sort, is the governor, about money, and he can of course do as he likes; but Raby oughtn't to gamble; it isn't form in a civilian. You needn't laugh, Belle, it's true; it would be quite different if he was in the army."

"Soldiers rush in where civilians fear to tread," parodied Belle contemptuously. "I wish people wouldn't gossip so. Why can't they leave their neighbours alone?"

Nevertheless that afternoon she stole over to the office, which was only separated from the house by an expanse of dusty, stubbly grass, and seeing her father alone in his private room comfortably reading the paper, slipped to his side, and knelt down.

"Well, my pretty Belle," he said caressing her soft fluffy hair, "why aren't you out riding with the others?"

"I didn't care to go; then you were to be at home, and I like that best. I don't see much of you as a rule, father."

Colonel Stuart's virtue swelled visibly, as it always did under the vivifying influence of his daughter's devotion. "I am a busy man, my dear, you must not forget that," he replied a trifle pompously; "my time belongs to the Government I have the honour to serve." The girl was a perfect godsend to him, acting on his half-dead sensibilities

like a galvanic battery on paralysed nerve-centres. He was dimly conscious of this, and also of relief that the influence was not always on him.

"I know you are very busy, dear," she returned, nestling her head on his arm, as she seated herself on the floor. "That's what bothers me. Couldn't I help you in your work sometimes? I write a very good hand, so people say."

Colonel Stuart let his paper fall in sheer astonishment. "Help me! why my dear child, I have any number of clerks."

"But I should like to help!" Her voice was almost pathetic; there was quite a break in it.

Her father looked at her in vague alarm. "You are not feeling ill, are you, Belle? Not feverish, I hope, my dear! It's a most infernal climate though, and one can't be too careful. You'd better go and get your mother to give you five grains of quinine. I can't have you falling sick, I can't indeed; just think of the anxiety it would be."

Belle, grateful for her father's interest, took the quinine; but no drug, not even poppy or mandragora, had power to charm away her restless dissatisfaction. Dick's office was no sinecure, and even his partial eyes could not fail to see that she was often captious, almost cross. It came as a revelation to him, for hitherto she had been a divinity in his eyes; and now, oh strange heresy! he found

himself able to laugh at her with increased, but altered devotion. Hitherto he had wreathed her pedestal with flowers; now he kept the woman's feet from thorns, and the impulse to make their pathways one grew stronger day by day. She, unconscious of the position, added fuel to the flame by choosing his society, and making him her confidant. Naturally with one so emotional as Dick, the crisis was not long in coming, and music, of which he was passionately fond, brought it about in this wise; for Belle played prettily, and he used to sit and listen to her like the lover in Frank Dicksee's *Harmony*, letting himself drift away on a sea of pleasure or pain, he scarcely knew which. So, one afternoon when they were alone in the house together, she sat down to the piano and played Schubert's *Frühlingslied*. The sunshine lay like cloth of gold outside, the doves cooed ceaselessly, the scent of the roses in John Raby's garden drifted in through the window with the warm wind which stirred the little soft curls on Belle's neck. The perfume of life got into the lad's brain, and almost before he knew it, his arms were round the girl, his kisses were on her lips, and his tale of love in her ears.

It was very unconventional of course, but very natural, — for him. For her the sudden rising to her full height with amazement and dislike in her face was equally natural, and even more unfore-

seen. The sight of it filled poor Dick with such shame and regret, that his past action seemed almost incredible to his present bewilderment. "Forgive me, Belle," he cried, "I was mad; but indeed I love you,—I love you."

She stood before him like an insulted queen full of bitter anger. "I will never forgive you. How dare you kiss me? How dare you say you love me?"

The lad's combativeness rose at her tone. "I suppose any one may dare to love you. I'm sorry I kissed you, Belle, but my conduct doesn't alter my love."

His manner, meant to be dignified, tended to bombast, and the girl laughed scornfully. "Love indeed! You're only a boy! what do you know about love?"

"More than you do apparently."

"I'm glad you realise the fact if *that* is what you call love."

"At any rate I'm older than you."

The retort that he was old enough to know better rose to Belle's lips, but a suspicion that this childish squabbling was neither correct nor dignified, made her pause and say loftily, "How can you ask me to forgive such a mean ungentlemanly thing?"

The last epithet was too much for Dick; he looked at her as if she had struck him. "Don't say that,

Belle," he said hoarsely. "It's bad enough that it's true, and that you don't understand; but don't say that." He leant over the piano and buried his face in his hands in utter despair. For the first time a pulse of pity shot through the storm of physical and mental repulsion in the girl's breast, but she put it from her fiercely. "Why shouldn't I say it if it is true?"

"Because you are kind; always so good and kind."

Again the pity had to be repulsed, this time still more harshly. "You will say next that I've been too kind, that I encouraged you, I suppose; that would put the finishing touch to your meanness."

This speech put it to Dick's patience; he caught her by both hands, and stood before her masterful in his wrath. "You shall not say such things to me, Belle! Look me in the face and say it again if you dare. You know quite well how I love and reverence you; you know that I would die rather than offend you. I forgot everything but you, — I lost myself, — you know it."

The thrill in his voice brought a new and distinctly pleasurable sense of power to the young girl, and, alas! that it should be so, made her more merciless. "I prefer actions to words. You have insulted me and I will never speak to you again." She regretted this assertion almost as it was uttered; it went too far and bound her down too much. She

was not always going to be angry with poor Dick surely? No! not always, but for the present decidedly angry, very angry indeed.

"Insult!" echoed Dick drearily, letting her hands slip from his. "There you go again; but fellows do kiss their cousins sometimes."

Had there been any grown-up spectators to this scene they must have laughed at the full-blown tragedy of both faces, and the alternate bathos and pathos of the pleas. They were so young, so very young, this girl and boy, and neither of them really meant what they said, Belle especially, with her vicious retort: "I am not your cousin, and I'm glad of it. I'm glad that I have nothing to do with you."

As before her harshness overreached itself, and made a man of him. "You want to put me out of your life altogether, Belle," he said more steadily, "because I have made you angry. You have a right to be angry, and I will go. But not for always. You don't wish that yourself, I think, for you are kind. Oh Belle! be like yourself! say one kind word before I go."

Again the consciousness of power made her merciless, and she stood silent, yet tingling all over with a half-fearful curiosity as to what he would say next.

"One kind word," he pleaded; "only one."

He waited a minute, then, with a curse on his

own folly in expecting pity, flung out of the room. So it was all over! A genuine regret came into the girl's heart and she crept away miserably to her own room, and cried.

"I wonder Dick isn't home to dinner," remarked Mrs. Stuart when that meal came round. "I do hope he isn't going back to his old habit of staying out. He heard to-day that his application for a post in the Salt Department was refused, and he has no patience like my own boys. I do hope he will come to no harm."

The empty chair renewed Belle's remorseful regret.

"Well! I can't have him kicking his heels in my office much longer," remarked the Colonel crossly. "The head-clerk complains of him. Confound his impudence! he actually interfered in the accounts the other day, and showed regular distrust. I must have good feeling in the office; that's a *sine qua non*."

"Oh, Dick's got a splendid opinion of himself," broke in Stanley. "He had the cheek to tell Raby yesterday that he played too much *écarté* with — " The speaker remembered his audience too late.

Colonel Stuart grew purple and breathless. "Do you mean to say that the boy, — that *boy* — presumed to speak to Raby, — to *my friend* Raby — about his private actions? Lucilla! What is the world coming to?"

This was a problem never propounded to his wife save under dire provocation, and the answer invariably warned him not to expect his own high standard from the world. This time she ventured upon a timid addition to the effect that rumour did accuse Mr. Raby of playing high.

"And if he does," retorted the Colonel, "he can afford to pay. Raby, my dear, is a fine young fellow, with good principles, — deuced good principles, let me tell you."

"I am very glad to hear it, Charles, I'm sure; for it would be a pity if a nice, clever, young man, who would make any girl a good husband, were to get into bad habits."

"Raby is a man any girl might be proud to marry. He is a good fellow." He looked at Belle, who smiled at him absently; she was wondering where Dick could be.

"Raby isn't a Christian," remarked Mabel. "He told us yesterday he was something else. What was it, Maud?"

"An erotic Buddhist."

"Esoteric," suggested Belle.

"It's all the same. He said we were the three Thibetan sisters and he worshipped us all. But we know who it is, don't we?"

"How you giggle, girls!" complained Colonel Stuart fretfully. "Belle never giggles. Dear

child, I will teach you *écarté* this evening. It will amuse you."

It amused him, which was more to the purpose; in addition it prevented him from falling asleep after dinner, which he was particularly anxious not to do that evening. So they played until, just as the clock was striking ten, a step was heard outside, and Colonel Stuart rose with a relieved remark that it must be John Raby at last. The opening door, however, only admitted truant Dick with rather a flushed face. "From Raby," he said handing a note to his uncle. "I met the man outside."

The scowl, which the sight of the culprit had raised on Colonel Stuart's face, deepened as he read a palpable excuse for not coming over to play *écarté*. It seemed inconceivable that Dick's remonstrance could have wrought this disappointment; yet even the suggestion was unpleasant. He turned on his nephew only too anxious to find cause of quarrel. It was not hard to find, for Dick was manifestly excited. "At your old tricks again, sir?" said his uncle sternly. "You've been drinking in the bazaar."

Now Dick, ever since the day on which Belle had come to him in distress over Charlie's abandonment to "pegs," had forsworn liquor, as he had forsworn many another bad habit. Even when driven to despair, he had not flown to the old anodyne. But

his very virtue had been his undoing, and a single stiff tumbler of whisky and water, forced on him by a friend who was startled by his looks as he returned fagged from a wander into the wilderness, had gone to his unaccustomed head in a most unlooked-for degree. The injustice of the accusation maddened him, and he retorted fiercely: "I haven't had so much to drink as you have, sir."

"Don't speak to your uncle like that, Dick," cried Mrs. Stuart alarmed. "You had better go to bed, dear; it is the best place for you."

"Leave the room, you dissipated young meddler," thundered the Colonel breaking in on his wife's attempt to avert a collision. It was the first time Belle had witnessed her father's passion, and the sight made her cling to him as if her touch might soothe his anger.

Dick, seeing her thus, felt himself an outcast indeed. "I've not been drinking," he burst out, beside himself with jealousy and rage. "The man who says I have is a liar."

"Go to bed, sir," bawled his uncle, "or I'll kick you out of the room. I'll have no drunkards here."

Luckless Dick's evil genius prompted an easy retort. "Then you'd better go first, sir; for I've seen you drunk oftener than you've seen me!"

The next instant he was at Belle's side pleading for disbelief. "No, no, Belle! it's a lie! I am mad

— drunk — anything — only it is not true!" His denial struck home to the girl's heart when the angry assertion might have glanced by. A flash of intelligence lit up the past: she recollected a thousand incidents, she remembered a thousand doubts which had made no impression at the time; and before Colonel Stuart's inarticulate splutterings of wrath found words, her eyes met Dick's so truthfully, so steadily, that he turned away in despair, in blank, hopeless despair.

"Why to-morrow?" he cried bitterly in answer to his uncle's order to leave the room instantly and the house to-morrow. "There's no time like the present, and I deserve it. Good-bye, Aunt Lucilla; you've been very kind, always; but I can't stand it any longer. Good-bye, all of you!"

He never even looked at Belle again; the door closed and he was gone.

"Poor, dear Dick!" remarked Mrs. Stuart in her high complaining voice. "He always had a violent temper, even as a baby. Don't fret about it, my dear," — for large tears were slowly rolling down Belle's cheeks — "He will be all right to-morrow, you'll see; and he has really been steadiness itself of late."

"He wasn't anything to speak of either," urged Mildred with her usual good-nature. "Only a little bit on, and I expect he had no dinner."

"Dinner or no dinner, I say he was drunk," growled Colonel Stuart sulkily. "No one lies like that unless he is, — that's my experience."

But Belle scarcely realised what they said. Her heart was full of fear, and though sleep came with almost unwelcome readiness to drive thought away, she dreamt all night long that some one was saying, "One kind word, Belle, only one kind word," and she could not speak.

CHAPTER V.

Outside the parallelograms of white roads centred by brown stretches of stubbly grass, and bordered by red and blue houses wherein the European residents of Faizapore dwelt after their kind, and our poor Belle lay dreaming, a very different world had been going on its way placidly indifferent, not to her only, but to the whole colony of strangers within its gates. The great plains, sweeping like a sea to the horizon, had been ploughed, sown, watered, harvested: children had been born, strong men had died, crimes been committed, noble acts done; and of all this not one word had reached the alien ears. Only the District Officer and his subaltern, John Raby, bridged the gulf by driving down every day to the court-house, which lay just beyond the boundaries of the cantonment and close to the native city; there, for eight weary hours, to come in contact with the most ignoble attributes of the Indian, and thence to drive at evening heartily glad of escape. In the lines of the native regiment Philip Marsden went in and out among his men, knowing them by name, and sympathising with their lives. But they too were a race apart from the tillers of

soil, the hewers of wood and drawers of water, who pay the bills for the great Empire.

Even old Mahomed Lateef came but seldom to see the Major *sahib* since he had been forced to send his Benjamin to Delhi, there, in a hotbed of vice and corruption, to gain a livelihood by his penmanship. The lad was employed on the staff of a red-hot Mahometan newspaper entitled "The Light of Islâm," and spent his days in copying blatant leaders on to the lithographic stones. Nothing could exceed the lofty tone of "The Light of Islâm." No trace of the old Adam peeped through its exalted sentiments save when it spoke of the Government, or of its Hindu rival "The Patriot." Then the editor took down his dictionary of synonyms, and, looking out all the bad epithets from "abandoned" to "zymotic," used them with more copiousness than accuracy. Sometimes, however, it would join issue with one adversary against another, and blaze out into fiery paragraphs of the following order:

> We are glad to see that yet once more "The Patriot," forgetting its nonsensical race-prejudice for the nonce, has, to use a colloquialism, followed our lead in pertinently calling on Government for some worthy explanation of the dastardly outrage perpetrated by its minions on a virtuous Mahometan widow, &c., &c.

And lovers of the dreadful, after wading through a column of abuse, would discover that the ancestral

dirt of an old lady's cowhouse had been removed by order of the Deputy Commissioner! Yet the paper did good: it could hardly do otherwise, considering its exalted sentiments; but for all that the occupation was an unwholesome one for an excitable lad like Murghub Ahmed. While his fingers inked themselves hopelessly over the fine words, his mind also became clouded by them. The abuse of language intoxicated him, until moderation seemed to him indifference, and tolerance sympathy. He took to sitting up of nights composing still more turgid denunciations; and the first time "The Light of Islâm" went forth, bearing not only his hand-writing, but his heart's belief on its pages, he felt that he had found his mission. To think that but four months ago he had wept with disappointment because he was refused the post of statistical writer in a Government office! Between striking averages, and evolving Utopias, what a glorious difference! He thanked Providence for the change, though his heart ached cruelly at times when he could spare nothing from his modest wage for the dear ones at home. He had a wife waiting there for him; ere long there might be a child, and he knew her to be worse fed than many a street-beggar. It seemed to him part of the general injustice which set his brain on fire.

"Words! Nothing but words," muttered old

Mahomed Lateef as he lay under the solitary *nim* tree in his courtyard and spelt out "The Light of Islâm" with the aid of a huge horn-rimmed pair of spectacles. "Pish! '*The pen is mightier than the sword!*' What white-livered fool said that? The boy should not have such water in his veins unless his mother played me false. God knows! women are deceitful, and full of guile."

This was only his habit of thought; he had no intention of casting aspersions on his much respected wife Fâtma Bibi, who just then appeared with a hookah full of the rankest tobacco. "I shall send for the boy, oh Fâtma Bi!" said the stern old domestic tyrant. "He is learning to say more than he dare do, and that I will not have. He shall come home and do more than he says — ha! ha!" Fâtma Bi laughed too, and clapped her wrinkled hands, while the shy girl, dutifully doing the daughter-in-law's part of cooking, turned her head away to smile lest any one should accuse her of joy because *he* was coming back.

So Mahomed Lateef covered a sheet of flimsy German note-paper, bought in the bazaar, with crabbed Arabic lettering, and the women rejoiced because the light of their eyes was coming back. And after all the lad refused stoutly to return. He wrote his father a letter, full of the most trite and beautiful sentiments, informing his aged parent that

times had changed, the old order given place to the new, and that he intended to raise the banner of *jehâd* (religious war) against the infidel. The women cried *Bismillah*, and Mahomed Lateef, despite his annoyance at the disobedience, could not help, as it were, cocking his ears like an old war-horse. Yet he wrote the lad a warning after his lights, which ran thus:

God and His prophet forbid, oh son of my heart, that I should keep thee back, if, as thou sayest, thou wouldst raise the banner of *jehâd*. If a sword be needed, I will send thee mine own friend; but remember always what the mullah taught thee, nor confound the three great things, — the Dur-ul-Islâm, the Dur-ul-Husub, and the Dur-ul-Ummun.[1] Have at the Hindu pigs, especially any that bear kindred to Shunker's fat carcase; he hath cheated me rascally, and built a window overlooking my yard for which I shall have the law of him. But listen for the cry of the muezzin, and put thy sword in the scabbard when its sound falls on thine ear, remembering 'tis the House of Protection, and not the House of the Foe. If thou goest to China, as perhaps may befall, seeing the *sahibs* fight the infidel there, remember to cool thy brother's grave with tears. Meanwhile, play singlestick with Shâhbâz Khân the Mogul, and if thou canst get the old Meean *sahib*, his father, on his legs, put the foils into his hand, rap him over the knuckles once, and he will teach thee more in one minute than his son in five.

[1] The three divisions recognised in Mahometan polemics. (1) The place of Islam; (2) the place of the enemy; (3) the place of protection. The sign of the latter is the liberty of giving the call to prayers.

Then the old Syyed lay down on his bed under the *nim* tree, and Fâtma Bi fanned the mosquitoes from him with a tinsel fan, and talked in whispers to Nasibun, the childless wife, of the deeds their boy was to do, while Haiyât Bi, the young bride, busy as usual, found time to dry her tears unseen. A fire burning dim in one corner of the courtyard was almost eclipsed by the moon riding gloriously in the purple-black sky overhead. From the other side of the high partition wall came the dull throbbing of the *dholki* (little drum) and an occasional wild skirling of pipes. The marriage festivities in Shunker Dâs's house had begun, and every day some ceremony or other had to be gone through, bringing an excuse for having the *marânsunis* (female musicians) in to play and sing. High up near the roof of the sugar-cake house with its white filigree mouldings gleamed the objectionable window. Within sat the usurer himself conferring with his jackal, one Râm Lâl, a man of small estate but infinite cunning. It was from no desire of overlooking Mahomed Lateef's women that Shunker Dâs frequented the upper chamber. He had other and far more important business on hand, necessitating quiet and the impossibility of being overheard. Even up there the two talked in whispers, and chuckled under their breath; while in the courtyard below the delicate child who stood between Shunker and

damnation ate sweetmeats and turned night into day with weary, yet sleepless, eyes.

The moon, shining in on the two courtyards, shone also on the church garden, as Major Marsden after going his rounds turned his horse into its winding paths. A curious garden it was, guiltless of flowers and planted for the most part with tombstones. Modern sanitation, stepping in like Aaron's rod to divide the dead from the living, had ceased to use it as a cemetery; but the records of long forgotten sorrows remained, looking ghostly in the moonlight. The branch of a rose-tree encroaching on the walk caught in the tassel of Major Marsden's bridle, and he stooped to disentangle it. Straightening himself again, he paused to look on the peaceful scene around him and perceived that some one, a belated soldier most likely, was lying not far off on a tombstone. The horse picked its way among many a nameless grave to draw up beside a figure lying still as if carved in stone.

"Now, my man, what's up?" said Major Marsden dismounting to lay a heavy hand on its shoulder. The sleeper rose almost automatically, and stood before him alert and yet confused. "Dick Smith! What on earth brings you here?"

The boy could scarcely remember at first, so far had sleep taken him from his troubles. Then he hung his head before memory. "I'm leaving Faiza-

pore, and came here — to wait for daylight; that's all."

But the moonlight on the tombstone showed its inscription, "Sacred to the memory of John Smith"; and Philip Marsden judged instantly that there was trouble afoot; boys do not go to sleep on their father's graves without due cause. Some scrape no doubt, and yet —. His dislike to Colonel Stuart made him a partisan, and he was more ready to believe ill of the elder, than of the younger man.

"Don't be in a hurry," he said kindly. "There's something wrong of course, but very few scrapes necessitate running away."

"There's nothing to make me run away," replied Dick, with a lump in his throat as he unconsciously contrasted this stranger's kindness with other people's harshness; "but go I must."

"Where?"

The question roused the sense of injury latent for years. "Where? How do I know? I tell you there's nothing for me to do anywhere — nothing! And then, when a fellow is sick of waiting, and runs wild a bit, they throw it in his teeth, when he has given it all up."

It was not very lucid, but the lad's tone was enough for Philip Marsden. "Come home with me," he said with a smile full of pity; "and have a real sleep in a real bed. You don't know how different things will seem to-morrow."

Dick looked at his hero, thought how splendid he was, and went with him like a lamb.

Next morning when the boy with much circumlocution began to tell the tale of his troubles, Major Marsden felt inclined to swear. Would he never learn to mistrust his benevolent impulses, but go down to his grave making a fool of himself? A boy and girl lovers' quarrel, — was that all? Yet as the story proceeded he became interested in spite of himself. "Do you mean to tell me," he said incredulously, "that Miss Stuart is absolutely ignorant of what goes on in that house?"

Dick laid his head on the table in sheer despair. "Ah Major, Major!" he cried, "I told her — I — you should have seen her face!" He burst into incoherent regrets, and praises of Belle's angelic innocence.

"It appears to me," remarked Major Marsden drily, "to be about the best thing that could have happened. Fiction is always unsafe. Belle, — as you call her — must have found it out sooner or later. The sooner the better, in my opinion."

"You wouldn't say that if you knew her as I do," explained the other eagerly; "or if you knew all that I do. There will be a smash some day soon, and it will kill Belle outright. Ah! if I hadn't been a fool and a brute, I might have stayed and perhaps kept things from going utterly wrong."

"Then why don't you go back?" asked his hearer impatiently.

"I can't! He won't have me in the office again. You don't know what mischief is brewing there."

"Thank you, I'd rather not know; but if you're certain this move of yours is final, — that is to say if you don't want to kiss and make friends with your cousin — [Poor Dick writhed inwardly, for he had kept back the full enormity of his offence] — then I might be able to help you in getting employment. They are laying a new telegraph-line to the front, and, as it so happens, a friend wrote to me a few days ago asking if I knew of any volunteers for the work."

The lad's face brightened. "Telegraphs! oh, I should like that! I've been working at them these two years, and I think — but I'm not sure — that I've invented a new — "

"All right," interrupted Major Marsden brusquely; "they can try you, at any rate. You can start to-night; that settles it. Now you had better go round and get your things ready."

Dick writhed again in mingled pride and regret. "I can't; I've said good-bye to them all; besides, I left a bundle of sorts in the bazaar before I went — there."

Philip Marsden shrugged his shoulders, remarking that the boy might do as he liked, and went off

to his work; returning about two o'clock, however, to find Dick asleep, wearied out even by a half-night's vigil of sorrow. "How soft these young things are," he thought, as he looked down on the sleeping boy, and noticed a distinctly damp pocket-handkerchief still in the half-relaxed hand. A certain scorn was in his heart, yet the very fact that he did notice such details showed that he was not so hard as he pretended. He went into the rough, disorderly room where he spent so many solitary evenings, lit a cigar, and walked about restlessly. Finally, telling himself the while that he was a fool for his pains, he sat down and wrote to Belle Stuart in this wise: —

My dear Miss Stuart, — At the risk of once more being meddlesome, I venture to tell you that your cousin, Dick Smith, goes off to Beluchistan to-night as telegraph overseer. It is dangerous work, and perhaps you might like to see him before he leaves. If so, by riding through the church garden about six o'clock you will meet him. He doesn't know I am writing, and would most likely object if he did; but I know most women believe in the duty of forgiveness. Yours truly, P. H. Marsden.

P.S. If you were to send a small selection of warm clothing to meet him at the bullock train office it, at any rate, could not fail to be a comfort to him.

Belle read this rather brusque production with shining eyes and a sudden lightening of her heart. Perhaps, as she told herself, this arose entirely from

her relief on Dick's account; perhaps the conviction that Major Marsden could not judge her very harshly if he thought it worth while to appeal to her in this fashion, had something to do with it. The girl however did not question herself closely on any subject. Even the dreadful doubt which Dick's mad words had raised the night before had somehow found its appointed niche in the orderly pageant of her mind where love sat in the place of honour. Was it true? The answer came in a passionate desire to be ignorant, and yet to protect and save. Very illogical, no doubt, but very womanly; to a certain extent very natural also, for her father, forced by the circumstances detailed in the last chapter to retire early to bed, had arisen next morning in a most edifying frame of mind, and a somewhat depressed state of body. He was unusually tender towards Belle, and spoke with kindly dignity of unhappy Dick's manifest ill-luck. These dispositions therefore rendered it easy for Belle to make excuses in her turn. Not that she made them consciously; that would have argued too great a change of thought. The craving to forget and forgive was imperative, and the sense of wrong-doing which her innate truthfulness would not allow to be smothered, found an outlet in self-blame for her unkindness to dear Dick. As for poor father — : the epithets spoke volumes.

"There is your cousin," said Major Marsden to Dick as Belle rode towards them through the overarching trees in the church garden. "Don't run away; I asked her to come. You'll find me by the bridge."

The lad was like Mahomet's coffin, hanging between a hell of remorse and a heaven of forgiveness, as he watched her approach, and when she reined up beside him, he looked at her almost fearfully.

"I'm sorry I was cross to you, Dick," she said simply, holding out her hand to him. The clouds were gone, and Dick Smith felt as if he would have liked to stand up and chant her praises, or fight her battles, before the whole world. They did not allude to the past in any way until the time for parting came, when Dick, urged thereto by the rankle of a certain epithet, asked with a furious blush if she would promise to forget — everything. She looked at him with kindly smiling eyes. "Good-bye, dear Dick," she said; and then, suddenly, she stooped and kissed him.

The young fellow could not speak. He turned aside to caress the horse, and stood so at her bridle-rein for a moment. "God bless you for that, Belle," he said huskily and left her.

Belle, with a lump in her own throat and tearful shining eyes, rode back past the bridge where Philip

Marsden, leaning over the parapet, watched the oily flow of the canal water in the cut below. He looked up, thinking how fair and slim and young she was, and raised his hat expecting her to pass, but she paused. He felt a strange thrill as his eyes met hers still wet with tears.

"I have so much to thank you for, Major Marsden," she said with a little tremor in her voice, "and I do it so badly. You see I don't always understand — "

Something in her tone smote Philip Marsden with remorse. "Please not to say any more about it, Miss Stuart. *I* understand, — and, — and, — I'm glad you do not." Thinking over his words afterwards he came to the conclusion that both these statements had wandered from the truth; but how, he asked himself a little wrathfully, could any man tell the naked, unvarnished, disagreeable truth with a pair of grey eyes soft with tears looking at him?

Dick, of course, raved about his cousin for the rest of the evening, and besought the Major to send him confidential reports on the progress of events. In his opinion disaster was unavoidable, and he was proceeding to detail his reasons, when Major Marsden cut him short by saying: "I would rather not hear anything about it; and I should like to know, first, if you are engaged to your cousin?"

Dick confessed he was not; whereupon his companion told him that he would promise nothing, except, he added hastily, catching sight of Dick's disappointed face, to help the girl in any way he could. With this the boy professed to be quite content; perhaps he had grasped the fact that Philip Marsden was apt to be better than his word. And indeed a day or two after Dick's departure Marsden took the trouble to go over and inquire of John Raby what sort of a man Lâlâ Shunker Dâs, the great contractor, was supposed to be.

The young civilian laughed. "Like them all, not to be trusted. Why do you ask?" He broke in on the evasive answer by continuing, "The man is a goldsmith by caste. I suppose you know that in old days they were never allowed in Government service. As the proverb says, 'A goldsmith will do his grandmother out of a pice.' But if the Lâlâ-ji gives you trouble, bring him to me. I've been kind to him, and he is grateful, in his way."

Now the history of John Raby's kindness to Lâlâ Shunker Dâs was briefly this: he had discovered him in an attempt to cheat the revenue in the matter of income-tax, and had kept the knowledge in his own hands. "Purists would say I ought to report it, and smash the man," argued this astute young casuist; "but the knowledge that his ruin in the matter of that *Rai Bâhâdur*-ship hangs by a

thread will keep the old thief straighter; besides it is always unwise to give away power."

That to a great extent was the keynote of John Raby's life. He coveted power, not so much for its own sake as for the use he could make of it. For just as some men inherit a passion for drink, he had inherited greed of gain from a long line of Jewish ancestry. The less said of his family the better: indeed, so far as his own account went, he appeared to have been born when he went to read with a celebrated "coach" at the age of sixteen. Memory never carried him further in outward speech; but as this is no uncommon occurrence in Indian society. the world accepted him for what he appeared to be, a well-educated gentleman, and for what he was, a man with a pension for himself and his widow. His first collector, a civilian of the old type, used to shake his head when John Raby's name was mentioned, and augur that he would either be hanged or become a Chief Court Judge. "He was in camp with me, sir," this worthy would say, "when a flight of wild geese came bang over the tent. I got a couple, the last with the full choke; and I give you my word of honour Raby never lifted his eyes from the *buniah's* book he was deciphering in a petty bond case!"

In truth the young man's faculty for figures, and his aptitude for discovering fraud, partook of the

nature of genius, and gained him the reputation of being a perfect *shaitan* (devil) among the natives. Philip Marsden, associated with him on a committee for the purchase of mules, learnt to trust his acumen implicitly, and became greatly interested in the clear-headed, well-mannered young fellow who knew such a prodigious amount for his years; pleasant in society too, singing sentimental songs in a light tenor voice, and having a store of that easy small-talk which makes society smooth by filling up the chinks. Being a regular visitor of Colonel Stuart's house John Raby saw a good deal of Belle, and liked her in a friendly, approving manner; but, whatever Mrs. Stuart may have thought, he had no more intention of marrying a penniless girl than of performing a pilgrimage, or any other pious act savouring of the Middle Ages.

"By the way, I haven't seen the Miss Van Milders or their mother lately," remarked Major Marsden one day to him, as they came home from their committee together and met Belle going out for her afternoon ride by herself.

"Oh, they've gone to Mussoorie; Belle's keeping house for her father."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone; queer *ménage*, ain't it? I believe the girl thinks she'll reform the Colonel; and he *is* awfully fond of her, but—" The younger man

shook his head with a laugh. It jarred upon Philip Marsden and he changed the subject quickly. So she had elected to stay with her father! Well, he admired her courage, and could only hope that she would not have to pay too dearly for it.

CHAPTER VI.

LÂLÂ SHUNKER DÂS having discarded all clothing save a scarf of white muslin tied petticoat-wise round his loins, lay on a wooden bed perched high on the topmost platform of his tall house. But even there the burning breezes of May brought no relief from the heat; and he lay gasping, while his faithful jackal Râm Lâl pounded away with lean brown knuckles at his master's fat body. The *massage* seemed to do little good, for he grunted and groaned dismally. In truth the Lâlâ ached all over, both in body and soul. A thousand things had conspired against him: his last and most expensive wife (after spending a fortune in pilgrimages) had committed the indiscretion of presenting him with a girl baby; his grandmother having died, he had been forced much against his will to shave his head; his greatest rival had been elevated to the Honorary Magistracy and (adding injury to insult) been associated with him on a *bunch* (bench), and justice grown in bunches is not nearly so remunerative to the grower as single specimens. These were serious ills, but there was one, far more trivial, which

nevertheless smarted worst of all; perhaps because it was the most recent.

That very morning Shunker Dâs, as behoved one of his aspirations, had testified to his loyalty by attending the usual parade in honour of the Queen's birthday. On previous occasions he had driven thither in his barouche, but ambition had suggested that an appearance on horseback would show greater activity, and please the Powers. So he bought a cast horse from the cavalry regiment just ordered on service, and having attired himself in glittering raiment, including a magnificent turban of pink Benares muslin, he took his place by the flagstaff. People congratulated him warmly on his confidential charger which, even at the *feu de joie*, seemed lost in philosophic reflections. Shunker Dâs waxed jubilant over the success of his scheme, and was just giving himself away in magnificent lies, when the bugle sounded for "close order" preparatory to a few words from the General to the departing cavalry regiment. On this the war-horse pricked up its ears, and starting off at a dignified trot rejoined its old companions, while the Lâlâ, swearing hideously, tugged vainly at the reins. Arrived at the line the conscientious creature sidled down it, trying vainly to slip into a vacant place. Failing of success, the intelligent beast concluded it must be on orderly duty, and just as the Lâlâ was congratulating him-

self on having finished his involuntary rounds, his horse, turning at right angles, bounded off to rejoin the General's staff. Away went the Lâlâ's stirrups. He must have gone too, despite his clutch on the mane, had not the streaming end of his *pugree* caught in the high crupper-strap and held fast. So stayed, fore and aft, he might have reached the goal in safety, had not the General, annoyed by the suppressed tittering around him, lost patience, and angrily ordered some one to stop that man. Whereupon a mischievous aide-de-camp gave the word for the "halt" to be sounded. Confused out of everything save obedience, the charger stopped dead in his tracks, and the Lâlâ shot over his head, still in a sitting posture. On being relieved of his burden, the co-ordination "stables" apparently came uppermost in the horse's mind, for it walked away slowly, bearing with it the end of the Lâlâ's turban still fastened in the crupper. He, feeling a sudden insecurity in his headgear, and being, even in his confusion, painfully conscious of his baldness, clung to the lower folds with both hands. At this slight check, the charger, not to be baulked, set off at a canter, and over rolled the fat Lâlâ, heels in air. Then, and not till then, one roar of laughter rent the air. For as he lay there on his back, kicking like a turned turtle, the *pugree* began to unwind like a ball of thread, while the Lâlâ held on like grim

death to the lower portion. Not until the last fold had slipped through his fingers and a quarter of a mile or so of pink muslin was fluttering across the parade ground, did he realise the position, and struggling to his seat pass his hand over his bald head with a deprecating smile.

"Go out, Raby, and pick him up," gasped the General aching with laughter. "You're in political charge, aren't you?"

But Philip Marsden, who happened to be on staff duty that day, was already pouring in oil and wine to the Lâlâ's hurt dignity when the young civilian came up with nonchalant courtesy. "*Shâhbâsh, sahib!*" he said, "you sat him splendidly, and that last prop would have undone a Centaur."

The Lâlâ grinned a ghastly smile, and Philip Marsden turned impatiently, saying aside: "Get him home, do! He looks so helpless with his bald head; it seems a shame to laugh."

John Raby raised his eyebrows. "The General shall lend him his carriage. That will soothe his wounded vanity."

So the Lâlâ, with his head tied up in a red pocket-handkerchief, went home in the big man's barouche, and the spectators of his discomfiture laughed again at the recollection of it.

"You ought to be the editor of a native newspaper, Marsden," remarked John Raby. "You

would be grand on the unsympathetic Anglo-Indian. But if I'd seen the Viceroy himself being unwound like a reel of cotton I must have chuckled."

"No doubt," replied the other laughing himself. "Yet I am sure a keen sense of the ludicrous is unfortunate in a conquering race. We English always laugh when policy should make us grave; that is why we don't succeed."

"Perhaps; for myself I prefer to grin. As some one says, humour is the religion of to-day. Those who believe in eternity have time for tears. We others,— why we cry '*Vogue la galère!*'"

Lâlâ Shunker Dâs, however, without any abiding belief in a future state, was in no laughing mood as he lay under Râm Lâl's manipulations, listening captiously to his items of bazaar rumour.

"And they say, Lâlâ-ji, that the Sirkar thinks of transferring Colonel Estuart *sahib*."

Shunker Dâs sat up suddenly and scowled. "Transfer Estuart *sahib!* — why?"

Râm Lâl redoubled his exertions on the new portion of the Lâlâ's frame thus brought within reach, until the latter, uttering dismal groans, sank back to his former position. "They say," he continued calmly, "that the Sirkar is beginning to suspect."

"Fool! idiot! knave!" growled his master, gasping at the furious onslaught on his fat stomach. "'Tis all thy bungling. Have I not bid thee not

go so fast? Times have changed since the Commissariat *sahibs* sat in their verandahs, and one could walk a file of twenty camels round and round the house until they counted the proper number. But remember! 'Tis thou who goest to the wall, not I. That's the compact. Shunker finds the money, Râmu runs the risk."

"Have I forgotten it, Lâlâ-ji?" replied the other with some spirit. "Râmu is ready. And 'tis Shunker's part to look after the wife and children when I'm in jail; don't forget that! The master would do better if he were bolder. This one would have made much in that fodder contract, but your heart was as water; it always is."

"And if Estuart is transferred; what then?"

"If the branch be properly limed, the bird sticks. Is it limed? Such things are the master's work, not mine."

"Ay! limed right enough for *him*. But the money, Râmu, the money! It will take months to lay the snare for a new man, and the war will be over." The Lâlâ positively wept at the idea.

Râm Lâl looked at him contemptuously. "Get what is to be got from this *sahib*, at any rate; that's my advice."

The very next day Lâlâ Shunker Dâs drove down to the Commissariat office, intent on striking a grand blow.

Things had been going on better than could have been expected in the large, empty house, where Belle, thinner and paler as the days of intense heat went by, did the honours cheerfully. It was not without a struggle that she had been allowed to remain with her father. Mrs. Stuart had prophesied endless evil, beginning with a bad reputation for herself as stepmother; but prudential reasons had given their weight in favour of the girl's earnest desire. To make light of the heat, and avoid flight to the hills, was a great recommendation for a civilian's wife, and that, Mrs. Stuart had decreed, was to be Belle's fate. So with many private injunctions to the *khansamah* not to allow the Miss *sahib* to interfere too much in the management, the good lady had, as usual, taken herself and her family to Mussoorie. Shortly after they left Fate played a trump for Belle by sending a slight attack of malarious fever to the Colonel. He was always dreadfully alarmed about himself, and a hint from the doctor about the consequences of over-free living, reduced him to toast and water for a week, and kept him from mess for three. Belle was in a heaven of delight; and she was just enjoying the sight of her father actually drinking afternoon tea, when Budlu came in to say the Lâlâ-ji wanted to see the Colonel.

"Don't go, father," pleaded Belle. "It's only that horrid fat man; tell him to come again."

John Raby, who often strolled across about tea-time, looked at Colonel Stuart and smiled. He knew most things in the station; among others how unpleasant a visitor Shunker Dâs might be to his host, and not being ill-natured, he chimed in with the girl by offering to see the man himself.

The Lâlâ, leaning back magnificently in his barouche, felt a sudden diminution of dignity at the sight of John Raby. "Bruises all right, Lâlâ?" asked the young man cheerfully, and Shunker's dignity sank lower still. "They ought to give you that *Rai Bâhâdur*-ship for the way you stuck to him; by George, they should! We don't often get men of your stamp, Lâlâ, with estates in every district,—do we? So you want to see the Colonel; what for?" he added suddenly and sternly.

"*Huzoor!*" bleated the fat man. "I, — I came to inquire after his honour's health."

"Much obliged to you! He is better; and I really think if you were to come, say this day fortnight, he might be able to see you."

Shunker Dâs hesitated, fear for his money making him brave. "There were rumours," he began, "that my good patron was about to be transferred."

"Sits the wind in that quarter," thought Raby, amused. "My dear Lâlâ," he said, "it's absolutely untrue. Your eighty thousand is quite safe, I assure you."

"*Huzoor!*"

"Good-bye, Lâlâ-ji — this day fortnight," and he returned to his cup of tea in high good-humour. Then he sat and played *écarté* with the Colonel for an hour while Belle worked and watched them carelessly.

"That makes fifteen," remarked the young man as he rose to go, whereupon Colonel Stuart assented cheerfully, for he had won that evening; and Belle looked up with a smiling farewell, unconscious and content. She lived in a fool's paradise, hugging the belief that her presence was the charm; as though Niagara was to be stemmed by a straw, or the habit of years by a sentiment. As time wore on, the few remaining ladies fled before that last awful pause ere the rains break, when a deadly weariness settles on all living things. Belle, feeling shy among so many men, ceased to go out except on the rare occasions when she could persuade her father to accompany her. But, though he still adhered to his habit of dining at home, he was moody and out of sorts. He, too, had heard rumours of transfer, and that meant the possibility of disaster not to be faced with composure. Restless and irritable, he began to relieve the great craving which took possession of him by all sorts of stimulant and narcotic drugs. And one day came an almost illegible note from him, bidding Belle not wait dinner for him.

She felt instinctively that this was the beginning of trouble; nor was she wrong, for though Colonel Stuart was full of excuses the next evening, he never even sent a note the day after that. So Belle ate her solitary dinners as best she might, and though she often lay awake till the small hours of the morning brought an altercation between Budlu and her father, she never sat up for him, or made any effort to meet him on his return. From this time, brutal though it may seem to say so, poor Belle's presence in the house, so far from being an advantage, became a distinct drawback. But for it, Colonel Stuart would have yielded to the mad craze for drink which generally beset him at this time of the year; and after a shorter or longer bout, as the case might be, have been pulled up short by illness. Instead of this, he tried to keep up appearances, and drugged himself with chloral and laudanum till the remedy grew worse than the disease so far as he himself was concerned. It served, however, to hide the real facts from his daughter; for he met her timid protests by complaints of ill-health, assertions that he knew what was best for him, and absolute refusal to call in a doctor.

She grew alarmed. The long, silent days spent in brooding over her father's altered demeanour were too great a strain on her nerves, and she began to exaggerate the position. Her thoughts turned

again and again to Dick; if he were there! ah, if he were only there! No one who has not had in extreme youth to bear anxiety alone, can fully understand the horror of silence to the young. Belle felt she must speak, must tell some one of her trouble; it seemed to her as if her silence was a sort of neglect, and that some one must be able to do something to set matters straight. But who? She hesitated and shrank, till one day her father broke down and began to cry piteously in the middle of his ordinary abuse of the servants at lunch. A stiff glass of whisky-and-water restored his anger effectually, and he made light of the incident; but that evening, when Philip Marsden came in late to dress for dinner he found a note awaiting him from Belle.

She, having received no answer, had been expecting him all the afternoon, and as time passed began to wonder at her own temerity in writing. Dick, it is true, had bidden her look on Major Marsden as one willing to help if needs be; but what could Dick know? She went out, after a pretence of dinner, to the little raised platform in the garden where chairs were set every evening for those who preferred it to the house. Belle liked it far better; the purple arch of sky, spangled with stars save where the growing moon outshone them, rested her tired eyes, and the ceaseless quiver of the cicala prevented her from thinking by its insistence. Suddenly her half-

doze was interrupted by a voice asking for the Miss *sahib*, and she stood up trembling and uncertain. Why had she sent for him, and what should she say now that he had come?

"I came as soon as I could, Miss Stuart," said Major Marsden, formally, as their hands met. "But I was out all day, and had a guest to entertain at mess." He stopped, dismayed at her appearance, and added in quite a different tone, "I am afraid you are ill."

She did indeed look ghastly pale in the moonlight, her eyes full of appeal and her lips quivering; yet her shyness had gone with the first look at his face, and she felt glad that she had sent for him. "It is father," she began, then could say no more for fear of breaking down.

The trivial words brought back the recollection of that first meeting with her months before, when she had made the same reply to his offer of help; and as he stood waiting for her to master the fast-rising sobs, a remorse seized him with the thought that surely some of this pain might have been prevented somehow, by some one.

"You must think me very silly," she murmured hastily.

"I think you are overdone," he replied, "and I don't expect you've had any dinner. Now have you?"

A smile struggled to her face. "I don't think I had,— much."

"Then I will tell the *khansamah* to bring you something now."

The full-blown tragedy of life seemed to have departed. She even wondered at her own tears as she sipped her soup, and told him of her troubles with a lightening heart. "Budlu says he never saw father like this before," was the climax, and even that did not seem a hopeless outlook.

"Could he not take leave?" suggested Major Marsden at once; leave being the panacea for all ills in India.

"That's what I want to know. I begged him to go, but the very idea excites him. Would it harm him officially? Is there any reason why he should not?"

Dick's words of warning recurred to Major Marsden unpleasantly. "None that I know of," he replied. "I will go round to Seymour's to-morrow, and get him to bundle you both off to the hills. You want change as much as your father. In a month's time you will be laughing at all these fears."

"I think you are laughing at them now," said Belle wistfully.

"Am I? Well, I promise not to laugh at you any more, Miss Stuart." He stood up, tall and straight, to say good-bye.

"Isn't that rather a rash promise, Major Marsden?"

"I don't think so. Anyhow I make it, and I'm very glad you sent for me. Considering how little you knew of me, — and how disagreeable that little had been — it was kind."

"I know a great deal of you," she replied, smiling softly. "Dick has told me a lot, — about the brevet, — and the intelligence-work — and the Afghan sepoy — "

"And the men in buckram too, I suppose? I'm afraid Dick is not to be trusted. Did he tell you how the man escaped next day, and I got a wigging?"

"No!" cried Belle indignantly. "Did he? — Did you, I mean? — what a shame!"

"On the contrary, it was quite right. I'll tell you about it some day, if I may. Meanwhile, goodbye, and don't starve; it really doesn't do any good!"

She watched him jingle down the steps, thinking how like an overgrown school-boy he looked in his mess-jacket. So life was not a tragedy after all, but a serio-comedy in which only the monologues were depressing and dull. She went in and played the piano till it was time to go to bed. Yet nothing had really changed, and Fate marched on relentlessly as before. We make our own feelings, and then sit down to weep or smile over them.

The very next afternoon Colonel Stuart was brooding silently over nothing at all in his private office-room, passing the time, as it were, out of mischief, till he went to dine with John Raby. For the latter, with a sort of contemptuous kindness, put the drag of an occasional game of *écarté* on to the Colonel's potations. Sitting in the dusk his face looked wan and haggard, and, despite his profound stillness, every nerve was wearied and yet awake with excitement; as might be seen from his unrestrained start when Shunker Dâs came into the room unannounced; for the office-hours being over the *chuprassie* had departed.

"Well, what is it now?" he cried sharply. "I saw you this morning. Haven't you got enough for one day? Am I never to have any peace?"

An angry tone generally reduced his native visitors to submission, but the Lâlâ was evidently in no mood for silence. He had taken up a small contract that morning, the earnest-money of which lay for the time in Colonel Stuart's safe. Since then he had heard casually that a long-expected source of profit over which he had often talked with the Colonel, and for which he had even made preparations, had slipped through his fingers. In other words, that all the mule-transport was to be bought by a special officer. "I've come, *sahib*," he blurted out, sitting down unasked, "to know

if it is true that Mardsen *sahib* has the purchase of mules."

"And if he has, what the devil is it to you, or to me?" The man's arrogance was becoming unbearable, and Colonel Stuart was a great stickler for etiquette.

"Only this; that if you are not going to deal fairly by me, you mustn't count on my silence; that's all!"

"Go and tell the whole bazaar I owe you money, you black scoundrel," cried his hearer, annoyed beyond endurance by the man's assumption of equality. "I'll pay you every penny, if I sell my soul for it, curse you!"

"Eighty thousand rupees is a tall price, *sahib*," sneered the Lâlâ. "And how about the contracts, and the commission, and the general partnership? Am I to tell that also?"

The Colonel stared at him in blank surprise. God knows in his queer conglomerate of morality it was hard to tell what elementary rock of principle might be found; yet to a certain extent honour remained as it were in pebbles, worn and frayed by contact with the stream of life. "General partnership! you black devil, what do you mean?"

"Mean!" echoed the Lâlâ shrilly. "Why, the money I've lent you, *paid* you for each contract; the commission I've given your clerks; the grain your horses have eaten; the —"

The Colonel's right hand was raised above his head; the first coarse rage of his face had settled into a stern wrath that turned it white. "If you stop here another instant, by God I'll kill you!"

The words came like a steel-thrust, and the Lâlâ without a word turned and fled before the Berserk rage of the Northman; it is always terrible to the Oriental, and the Lâlâ was a heaven-sent coward.

"Stop!" cried the Colonel as the wretched creature reached the door. He obeyed and came back trembling. "Take your money for the contract with you; it's cancelled. I won't have it in the house. Take it back and give me the receipt I gave you; give it me, I say." The Colonel, fumbling at the lock of the safe, stuttered and shook with excitement. "Take 'em back," he continued, flourishing a roll of notes. "The receipt! — quick! out with it! — the receipt for the three thousand five hundred I gave you this morning!"

"*Huzoor! Huzoor!* I am looking for it; be patient one moment!" The Lâlâ's quivering fingers blundered among the papers in his pocket-book.

"Give it me, or, by heaven, I'll break every bone in your body!" His hand came down with an ominous thud on the table.

"I will give it, *sahib*, — I have it, — here — no — ah! praise to the gods!" He shook so that the paper rustled in his hand. Colonel Stuart seized it, and

tearing it to bits, flung the pieces in the waste paper basket at his feet. "There goes your last contract from me, and there's the door, and there's your money!" As he flung the notes in the man's face they went fluttering over the floor, and he laughed foolishly to see them gathered up in trembling haste.

"Gad!" he muttered as he sank exhausted into a chair, "there isn't much fear of Shunker so long as I've a stick in my hand. Hullo! what's that? Something rustled under the table. Here, Budlu! quick, lights! It may be a snake! Confound the servants; they're never to be found!"

He stopped and drew his hand over his forehead two or three times. Just then Budlu, entering with the lamp, stooped to pick something from the floor. It was a note for a thousand rupees, crisp and crackling.

Colonel Stuart looked at it in a dazed sort of way, then burst into a roar of laughter and put it in his pocket-book. "My fair perquisite, by Jove! and it will come in useful to-night at *écarté*. Budlu, give me the little bottle. I must steady my nerves a bit if I'm to play with Raby."

CHAPTER VII.

People who talk of the still Indian night can scarcely do so from experience, for, especially during the hot weather, darkness in the East is vocal with life. The cicala shrills its loudest, the birds are awake, and the very trees and plants seem to blossom audibly. Go round an Indian garden at sunset and it is a sepulchre; the roses shrivelled in their prime, the buds scorched in the birth, the foliage beaten down by the fierce sun. Visit it again at sunrise and you will find it bright with blossom, sweet with perfume, refreshed with dew. That is the work of night; what marvel then if it is instinct with sound and movement! Never for one hour does silence fall upon the world. The monotonous beat of some native musician's drum goes on and on; a village dog barks, and is answered by another until seventy times seven; a crow takes to cawing irrelatively; the birds sing in snatches, and the Indian cock, like that of scriptural story, crows for other reasons besides the dawn.

The long-legged rooster who habitually retired to sleep on the summit of Colonel Stuart's cook-room, had, however, legitimate cause for his vociferations,

and dawn was just darkening the rest of the sky when the sudden flapping of his wings startled the horse of an early wayfarer who came at a walk down the Mall.

It was Philip Marsden setting out betimes for a two days' scour of the district in search of the very mules out of which Shunker Dâs had hoped to make so much profit. Most men, carrying ten thousand rupees with them, would have applied for a treasure-chest and a police guard; but Major Marsden considered himself quite sufficient security for the roll of currency notes in his breast-pocket. As he quieted the frightened horse, his close proximity to the Commissariat office reminded him that he had forgotten to apply for a certain form on which he had to register his purchases; the omission would entail delay, so he anathematised his own carelessness and was riding on, when a light in the office-windows attracted his attention. It was early for any one to be at work, but knowing how time pressed in all departments under the strain of war, he thought it not improbable that some energetic *babu* was thus seeking the worm of promotion, and might be able to give him what he required. Dismounting, lest his horse's tread should disturb the sleepers in the house by which he had to pass, he hitched the reins to a tree, and made his way towards the office; not without a kindly thought of the girl, forgetful of care,

who lay sleeping so near to him that, unconsciously, he slackened his step and trod softly. He had been as good as his word, and that very day the doctor was to go over and prescribe immediate change. Change! he smiled at the idea, wondering what change could stem the course of the inevitable.

As he drew near he saw that the light came, not from the office, but from its chief's private room. He hesitated an instant; then a suspicion that something might be wrong made him go on till he could see through the open door into the room. Thefts were common enough in cantonments, and it was as well to make sure. Through the *chick* he could distinctly see a well-known figure seated at the writing-table, leaning forward on its crossed arms.

"Drunk!" said Philip Marsden to himself with a thrill of bitter contempt and turned away. The bearer would find the Colonel and put him decently to bed long before the girl was up. Poor Belle! The little platform where she had stood but the night before was faintly visible, bringing a recollection of her pale face and sad appeal. "It is father," — the first words she had ever said to him; the very first! He retraced his steps quickly, set the *chick* aside, and entered the room. The lamp on the table was fast dying out, but its feeble flicker fell full on the Colonel's grey hair, and lit up the shining gold lace on his mess-jacket. Silver, and gold, and scarlet,

— a brilliant show of colour in the shabby, dim room. A curious smell in the air and a great stillness made Philip Marsden stop suddenly and call the sleeper by name. In the silence which followed he heard the ticking of a chronometer which lay close to him. He called again, not louder, but quicker, then with swift decision passed his arm round the leaning figure and raised it from the table. The grey head fell back inertly on his breast, and the set, half-closed eyes looked up lifelessly into his.

"Dead," he heard himself say, "dead!" — dead, not drunk. As he stood there for an instant with the dead man's head finding a resting-place so close to his heart, the wan face looking up at him as if in a mute appeal, a flame of bitter regret for his own harsh judgment seemed to shrivel up all save pity. The great change had come, to end poor Belle's anxieties. And she? Ah! poor child, who was to tell her of it?

He lifted the head from his breast, laying it once more, as he had found it, on the crossed arms; then looked round the room rapidly. An empty bottle of chloral on the table accounted for the faint sickly smell he had noticed. Was it a mistake? If not, why? Perhaps there was a letter. Something at any rate lay under the nerveless hands, powerless now to defend their secret. Philip Marsden took the paper from them gently and turned up the expir-

ing lamp till it flared smokily. The blotted writing was hard to read, yet easy to understand, for it told a tale too often written; a tale of debt, dishonour, remorse, despair. Ten thousand rupees borrowed from the safe, and an unsigned cheque for the amount, drawn on no one, but payable to the Government of India, lying beside the dead man in mute witness to the last desire for restitution in the poor stupefied brain. A pile of official letters were scattered on the floor as if they had fallen from the table. All save one were unopened, but that one contained a notification of Colonel Stuart's transfer. Major Marsden drew a chair to the table and deliberately sat down to think.

Something must be done, and that quickly, for already the merciless light of day was gaining on the darkness. "And there is nothing hid that shall not be made manifest;" the words somehow recurred to his memory bringing another pulse of pity for poor Belle. What was to be done? The answer came to him suddenly in a rush, as if it had all been settled before. Why had Fate sent him there with more than enough money to save the girl from shame? Money that was his to use as he chose, for he could repay it twenty times over ere nightfall. Why had Fate mixed the girl's life with his, despite his efforts to stand aloof? Why had she sent for him? Why, — why was he there? The dead man's keys lay on

the table, the sum owed was clearly set down in black and white, the safe close at hand. What was there, save a personal loss he could well afford, to prevent silence? And he had promised help —

When the hastily-summoned doctor came in a few minutes later the bottle of chloral still lay on the table, but the blotted paper and the cheque were gone. The lamp had flared out, and a little heap of grey ashes on the hearth drifted apart as the doors and windows were flung wide open to let in all the light there was.

"He has been dead about two hours," said the doctor. "Over-dose of chloral, of course. I forbade it from the hospital, but he got it elsewhere."

They had laid the dead man on the floor, and the grey dawn falling on his face made it seem greyer still. The native servants huddled trembling at the door; the two Englishmen stood looking down upon the still figure.

"There is always the fear of an over-dose," said Philip Marsden slowly, "or of some rash mistake."

The doctor met his look comprehensively. "Exactly! who can tell? Unless there is circumstantial evidence, and I see none as yet. Anyhow he was not responsible, for he has been on the verge of *delirium tremens* for days."

"Then you give the benefit of the doubt?"

"Always, if possible."

Again the wind of dawn fanning the dead man's hair drifted the grey ashes further apart.

"He had better stay here," continued the doctor. "Moving him might rouse the poor girl, and there's no need for that as yet. By the way, who is to tell her? There isn't a lady or a parson in the place.'

"I suppose I must," returned Philip after a pause. "I think it might be best, since she confided her trouble to me. But couldn't I get some sort of a woman from barracks just to stay with her?"

"Right; you're a thoughtful fellow, Marsden. Take my buggy and go to the sergeant-major; his wife will know of some one. I'll stay till you return in case she wakes; and look here, as you pass send a man about the coffin. The funeral must be this evening, and — "

Philip Marsden fled from the dreary details of death with a remark that the doctor could send a messenger. He was no coward, yet he felt glad to escape into the level beams of the rising sun. As he drove down along the staring white roads he asked himself more than once why he had interfered to save a girl he scarcely knew from the knowledge of her father's dishonour; and if he could find no sufficient reason for it he could find no regret either. It had been an impulse, and it was over. He had kept his word to Dick, and done his best to drive care from those clear eyes,— what beautiful eyes they were!

"Och then!" cried Mrs. O'Grady, the sergeant-major's wife, who, hastily roused from her slumbers, came out into the verandah in scanty attire, "and is the swate young leddy alone? It's meself wud go at wanst but that I'm a Holy Roman, surr, and shud be talkin' of the blessed saints in glory. An' that's not the thing wid a Prothestant in his coffin."

Despite his anxiety her hearer could not repress a smile. "I don't set so much store by religious consolation, Mrs. O'Grady. It's more a kind, motherly person I want."

"Then, Tim!" cried the good lady, appealing to her spouse who had appeared in shirt and trousers, "Mrs. Flanigan wud be the woman, but that she's daily expectin' her tinth — "

"Isn't there some kindly person who's seen trouble?" hastily interrupted the Major.

"Ah, if it's the throuble you're wantin', take little Mrs. Vickary. A Baptist and a widder,— more by token twice; bore with two dhrunken bastes, Major, like a blissed angel, and wud be ready to spake up for anny one."

Major Marsden, with a recollection of Widow Vickary's sad face as nurse by a comrade's sick bed, pleaded for a younger and brighter one. Thereupon the serjeant-major suggested poor Healy's Mary Ann, but his wife tossed her head. "What the men see in that gurrll, surr, I can't say; but she'll go, and

cheerful, wid her little boy; a swate little boy, surr, like thim cherubs with a trumpet — for her father she come to live wid died of the fayver a month gone, and her man is waiting to be killed by thim Afghans somewhere."

So Major Marsden, driving back with poor Healy's Mary Ann and the cherub wielding a piece of sugar-cane as trumpet, found Belle still sleeping.

Then together, in the fresh early morning, they broke the sad tidings to the girl. How, it does not much matter, for words mean nothing. We say, "He is dead," many and many a time, carelessly, indifferently. Then comes a day when the sentence is fraught with wild despair and helpless pain. The sun seems blotted out, and the world is dark. Yet the words are the same, nor can pen and ink write them differently.

"Let me see that he is dead! Oh, let me see him!" was her cry; so they took her across to the shabby room where everything stood unchanged save for the sheeted figure on the string bed. The gardener had strewn some roses over it and the sun streamed in brightly. The sight brought no real conviction to Belle. It all seemed more dreamlike than ever. To fall asleep, as she had done, in the turmoil of life, and to wake finding the hush of death in possession of all things! She let Philip Marsden lead her away passively like a child, and all through

the long day she sat idle and tearless, with her hands on her lap, as if she were waiting for something or some one. Yet it was a busy day in that quiet, empty house; for in India death comes rudely. Many a time has the father to superintend the making of the little coffin, while the mother stitches away to provide a daintier resting-place for the golden head that is used to frills and lace; until, in the dawn, those two go forth alone to the desolate graveyard, and he reads the Church service as best he can, and she says "Amen" between her sobs. There was none of this strain for Belle, nothing to remind her of the inevitable; so she wondered what they wanted of her when, as the glare of sunset reddened the walls of her room, Major Marsden came and looked at her with pitying eyes. "It is time we were starting, Miss Stuart," he said gently.

"Starting! where?"

"We thought you would like to go to the cemetery, and I have arranged to drive you down. It will be a military funeral, of course."

She rose swiftly in passionate entreaty. "Ah no, no! not so soon! he is not dead! Oh I cannot, I cannot!" Then seeing the tender gravity of his face, she clasped her hands on his arm and begged to see *him* once more,— just to say good-bye.

He shook his head. "It is too late — it is best not."

"But I have no dress,— it can't be —" she pleaded vainly.

"Every one will be in white as you are," he returned with tears he could not check in his eyes. "Come! it will be better for you by and by." He laid his hand on her clasped ones. She looked in his eyes doubtfully, and did as she was bidden.

"We will drive out a bit first," said Philip, when she had taken her seat by his side in the tall dog-cart that seemed so out of keeping with its dismal office. "We have plenty of time for I thought the air would do your head good,— and,— it was best for you to be away just now."

Better, and best! As if anything could make any difference now! "You are very kind," she said in dull recognition of his care.

Philip Marsden never forgot that drive; the memory of it remained with him for years as a kind of nightmare. The girl in her white dress and sailor hat as he had seen her at many a tennis-party; the great bank of clouds on the horizon telling of welcome rain; the little squirrels leaping across the white road; the cattle returning homewards amid clouds of dust; the stolid stare of the natives as they passed by. It was almost a relief to stand side by side before an open grave listening to an even, disciplined tramp audible above the muffled drums coming nearer and nearer.

A dingy brick wall bleached to mud-colour shut out all view, but high up in the sky, above the fringe of grey tamarisk trees, a procession of flame-edged clouds told that, out in the west, Nature was celebrating the obsequies of day in glorious apparel. Suddenly *The Dead March* struck up, loud and full, bringing to Philip Marsden's memory many a sword-decked coffin and riderless charger behind which he had walked, wondering if his turn would come next. The music ceased with a clash of arms at the gate; and after a low-toned order or two the procession appeared in narrow file up the central path. The white uniforms looked ghostly in the deepening shadows; but through a break in the trees a last sunbeam slanted over the wall, making the spikes on the officers' helmets glow like stars.

Belle's clasped yet listless fingers tightened nervously as the Brigade-Major's voice rose and fell in monotonous cadence about "our dear brother departed." It seemed to her like a dream; or rather as if she too were dead and had no tears, no grief, nothing but a great numbness at her heart. Then some one put a clumsily-made cross of white flowers into her hands, bidding her lay it on the coffin, bared now of the protecting flag; and she obeyed, wondering the while why other people should have thought of these things when she had not, and thinking how crooked it was, and how much better she could have

made it herself. Perhaps; for the hands that twined it were not used to such woman's work. It was Philip Marsden's task, also, to throw the first handful of earth into the grave, and draw Belle's arm within his own before the salutes rang out. They startled the screaming parrots from their roost among the trees, and sent them wheeling and flashing like jewels against the dark purple clouds.

"Was it never going to end?" she thought wearily as they waited again, and yet again, for the rattle of the rifles. Yet she stood heedlessly silent, even when the band struck into quick time and the cheerful echo of the men's answering footsteps died away into the distance.

"Take her home," said the doctor, who with John Raby had remained to see the grave properly filled in. "I'll call round by and by with a sleeping draught; that will do her more good than anything."

As they drove back she complained, quite fretfully, of the cold, and her companion reined in the horse while he wrapped his military coat round her, fastening it beneath her soft dimpled chin with hands that trembled a little. She seemed to him inexpressibly pitiful in her grief, and his heart ached for her.

"It is going to rain, I think," she said suddenly, with her eyes fixed on the dull red glow barred by heavy storm clouds in the west; adding in a lower tone, "Father will get wet!"

Major Marsden looked at her anxiously and drove faster, frightened at the dull despair of her tone. He had meant to say good-bye at the door, but he could not. How could he leave her to that unutterable loneliness? And yet what good could he do beyond beguiling her to take a few mouthfuls of food? Poor Healy's Mary Ann proved helpless before a form of grief to which she was utterly unaccustomed, and as her presence seemed to do more harm than good Philip Marsden sent her into the next room, where she nursed her boy and wept profusely. He sat talking to Belle till long after the mess-hour, and then, when he did turn to go, the sight of her seated alone, tearless and miserable in the big, empty room was too much for his soft heart. He came back hastily, bending over her, then kneeling to look in her downcast face, and take her cold little hands into his warm ones and say kind words that came from his very heart. Perhaps they brought conviction, perhaps the touch of his hand assured her of sympathy, for suddenly her dull despair gave way; she laid her head on his shoulder and cried pitifully, as children cry themselves to sleep.

With the clasp of his fingers on hers and his breath stirring her soft curly hair, Philip Marsden's heart beat fast and his pulses thrilled. His own emotion startled and perplexed him; he shrank from it, and yet he welcomed it. Did he love her? Was this the meaning of it all?

"How good you are," she whispered, trying to regain her composure. "What should I have done without you?" Her unconsciousness smote him with regret and a great tenderness.

"There are plenty who will be kind to you," he answered unsteadily. "Life holds everything for you yet, my dear; peace, and happiness, and love."

Love! Did it hold his for her? he asked himself again as he walked homewards in the dark. Love! He was quite a young man still, only two and thirty, yet he had deliberately set passion and romance from him years before. Poverty had stood between him and the realisation of a dream till, with the sight of his ideal profoundly happy as some one else's wife, had come distrust and contempt for a feeling that experience showed him did not, could not last. Why, therefore, should it enter into and disturb his life at all? Friendship? ah, that was different! Perhaps the future held a time when he would clasp hands with a life-companion; a woman to be the mistress of his home, the mother of his children. But Belle! poor little, soft Belle Stuart, with her beautiful grey eyes! He seemed to feel the touch of her hand in his, the caress of her hair on his lips; and though he laughed grimly at himself, he could not master the joy that took possession of him at the remembrance. Dear little Belle! Amidst the doubt and surprise which swept over him as he realised

his own state of mind, but one thing gave him infinite satisfaction,— he had saved her from the far more lasting trouble of her father's disgrace. Friend, or lover, it had been a good deed to do, and he was glad that he had done it. Nothing could alter that. And while he slept, dreaming still of his clasp on the little cold yet willing hand, an official envelope lay on the table beside him mocking his security. He opened it next morning, to lay it aside with a curse at his own ill luck, though it was only a notification that Major P. H. Marsden would carry on the current duties of the Commissariat office till further orders. He had half a mind to go over to the Brigade office and get himself excused: a word or two about his other work would do it; but his pride rose in arms against any shirking for private reasons. Besides, there might be nothing wrong in Colonel Stuart's accounts, and even if there was, he would be the best man to find it out. Yet he walked up and down the verandah a prey to conflicting desires, bitterly angry with himself for hesitating an instant. Common sense told him that it might be as well for one less biassed than he was by previous knowledge to undertake the scrutiny, that it was scarcely fair for him to go to the task with a foregone conclusion in his mind; but pride suggested that he could not trust himself to decide fairly even now. How could he, when he

was bitterly conscious of one overmastering desire to save Belle? Then came the thought that if she was indeed what in his heart he believed her to be, if her steadfastness and straightforwardness were more than a match for his own, then the very idea of his refusing the task would be an offence to her. After that, nothing could have prevented him from placing himself with open eyes in a position from which, in common fairness to himself and others, he ought to have escaped.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FEW days after Colonel Stuart's death John Raby was making up his accounts in a very unenviable frame of mind, though the balance on the right side was a large one. As a rule this result would have given him keen pleasure; for though he was as yet too young to enjoy that delight of dotage, the actual fingering of gold, he inherited the instinct too strongly not to rejoice at the sight of its equivalent in figures. There were two reasons for his annoyance. First, the constantly recurring regret of not being able to invest his savings as he chose. With endless opportunities for turning over a high percentage coming under his notice, it was galling to be restricted by the terms of his covenant with Government from any commercial enterprise. Not that he would have scrupled to evade the regulation had the game been worth the candle; but as yet it was not. By and by, when his capital warranted a plunge, he had every intention of risking his position, and, if need be, of throwing it up. But for this justification he must wait years, unless indeed Fate sent him a rich wife. Heiresses however are scarce in India, and furlough was not yet

due. So John Raby had to content himself with four per cent. which was all the more annoying when he remembered that Shunker Dâs was making forty out of the very indigo business on which he had tried to evade the income-tax. Sooner or later John Raby intended to have his finger in that pie, unless some more fortunate person plucked the plum out first.

The other reason for his annoyance arose from the fact, clearly demonstrated by his neat system of accounts, that over nine thousand rupees of his balance were the proceeds of *écarté* played with a man who had had the confidence to make him his executor. The young civilian had no qualms of conscience here either; it had been a fair fight, the Colonel considering himself quite as good at the game as his antagonist. But somehow the total looked bad beside that other one, where intricate columns of figures added themselves into a row of nothings for the widow and orphans. Not a penny, so far as the executor could see, after paying current debts. About Madame and the black-and-tans, as he irreverently styled her family, he did not much concern himself; but for Belle it was different. He liked the girl, and had often told himself that the addition of money would have made her an excellent wife; just the sort one could safely have at home; and that to a busy man meant much. The thought that

Philip Marsden with his large fortune showed a disposition to annex the prize lessened his regrets for her poverty, and yet increased them. Why, he asked himself savagely, did nice girls never have money? The only gleam of satisfaction, in short, to be yielded by the balance was the remembrance that his possession of the nine thousand rupees prevented Lâlâ Shunker Dâs from absorbing it. As a matter of fact his executorship had proved a wholesome check on the usurer's outcries, and it gave the young man some consolation to think that no one could have managed the Lâlâ so well as he did. The smile raised by this remembrance lingered still when Major Marsden walked, unannounced, through the window in unceremonious Indian fashion.

"Hullo," said John Raby, "glad to see you. Miss Stuart is much better to-day."

There was no reason why this very pleasant and natural remark should annoy his hearer, but it did. It reminded him that John Raby had acquired a sort of authority over the dead man's daughter by virtue of his executorship. Neither of them had seen her since the day of the funeral, for she had been hovering on the verge of nervous fever; but the responsibility of caring for her had fallen on John Raby and not on Philip Marsden. John Raby, and not he, had had to make all the necessary arrangements for her comfort and speedy departure to the hills as soon as

possible; for Mrs. Stuart had collapsed under the shock of her husband's death, and the rapid Indian funeral had made the presence of the others impossible. So Philip Marsden felt himself to be out in the cold, and resented it.

"The nurse told me so when I inquired just now," he replied shortly.

"I'm to see her this afternoon when she comes back from her drive. I've sent for Shunker Dâs's carriage."

Major Marsden frowned. "You might have chosen some one else's, surely. He ruined her father."

"Not at all; he lent him money. Some one had to do it."

"Well, it's a grim world, and her drive can't be more so than the last she had." The remembrance evidently absorbed him, for he sat silent.

"You're looking used up, Marsden," said the other kindly. "Anything the matter?"

"Yes."

"Well, if it has to do with the Commissariat business I don't wonder. The Colonel's private affairs are simply chaos." He pointed to the piles of papers on and below the table with a contemptuous smile.

Major Marsden shook his head. "The public ones are in fairly good order. I'm surprised at the method; but of course he had good clerks; and then the system of checks — "

"Make it possible to be inaccurate with the utmost accuracy. What's wrong?"

Philip Marsden moved uneasily in his chair and gave an impatient sigh. "I suppose I've got to tell you, because you're the man's executor; but I don't want to."

"Never do anything you don't want, my dear fellow; it's a mistake. You don't know what will please other people, and you generally have a rough guess at your own desires."

"I don't suppose this will please you, the fact is there is a deficit of four thousand five hundred rupees in the private safe of which Colonel Stuart kept the key."

"Is that all?"

"All! Surely it is enough?"

"Quite enough; but I'm not exactly surprised."

"Then I am," returned the Major emphatically. "In fact I don't believe there really is any deficit at all. Do you think Shunker Dâs is the sort of man to make a false claim?"

"Not unless he has fallen upon fair proofs," said the other coolly. "What claim does he make?"

"He says he paid in three thousand five hundred the very day of Colonel Stuart's death and produces a receipt. Another thousand was paid in by some one else the day before. It seems odd that this should just make up the deficiency."

"But you have no proof that these are actually the notes missing?"

"Curiously enough I have. Contrary to what one would have expected, Colonel Stuart made a practice of writing the numbers of notes received in a private ledger, and none of the four entered as having been given by Shunker are to be found. Now, as you were Stuart's friend, and are his executor, do you know of any large payment made to any one within two days of his death? It limits itself, you see, to that time."

"Nothing to account for three thousand five hundred," returned John Raby a little hastily. "Let's stick to Shunker's claim first; it may be false. You say he holds a receipt?"

"Yes, and gives the numbers of the notes also."

"Right?"

"All but one. The book gives a 3 where he gives a 5; but natives often confuse figures."

John Raby nodded, and leant back in his chair thinking. "I believe the notes were paid," he said at last, "and if they are not to be found, the inference, I'm afraid, is clear. The Colonel *borrowed* them."

"I don't believe it," returned the Major slowly. He had been drawing diagrams idly on a piece of paper and now threw aside the pen with decision. "I don't believe it," he repeated, "and I'll tell you

why; I'd rather not tell you, as I said before, but as you're his executor I must. When I found him dead that morning there was a paper,— it wasn't a mistake, you understand" — his hearer nodded again — "and in it he had set down the reasons, or want of reasons, clearly enough. I haven't got the paper; I burnt it. I suppose I ought to have kept it, but it seemed a pity at the time. Anyhow the total he had,— borrowed — was close on ten thousand."

"Ten! you said there was only — "

"Just so; you see, as luck would have it, I had money with me at the time. So I replaced it."

"Ten thousand?"

"No; to be strictly accurate nine thousand seven hundred and fifty. Well,— you needn't stare so, Raby! Why the devil shouldn't I if I chose?"

John Raby gave a low whistle. "You must be awfully fond of Belle," he said after a pause.

Philip flushed a deep angry red. Ever since the possible necessity for giving his action to the world had dawned upon him he had known what comment would be made; but the knowledge did not lessen its sting. "Don't you think we had better keep Miss Stuart's name out of the conversation? I merely tell you this to show that I have good reasons for supposing that there is some chicanery, or confusion — "

"I beg your pardon! exactly so," assented John

Raby with a smile. "I am as anxious as you can be to keep her out of it; and so, as executor, I'll undertake to refund the deficiency at once. There may be some mistake, but it is best to have no inquiry."

"I hardly see how that is to be prevented, for of course I had to report the matter."

John Raby literally bounded from his chair in unrestrained vexation. "Reported it! my dear Marsden, what the devil! — Oh, I beg your pardon, but really, to begin with, you cut your own throat."

"What else could I do?" asked the other quietly. "You forget I am in charge of the office."

"Do?" returned his hearer, pausing in his rapid pacing of the room. "Ah, I don't suppose *you* could do anything else; but I'm not so high-flown myself, and I can't see the good of chucking ten thousand rupees into the gutter for the sake of a sentiment, and then chucking the sentiment after it. For the girl adored her father, and I warn you — "

"If we can't keep off that subject I'll go," interrupted Philip rising. "I thought you might know something. Colonel Stuart dined with you that last evening, if you remember."

The civilian needed no reminder; indeed for the last ten minutes he had been distractingly conscious of a note for a thousand rupees lying in his despatch-box which might throw some light on the mysterious

disappearances. "Yes," he replied, "he did, and, — I see what you are thinking of, Marsden — he played *écarté* too; but to tell the truth, he was so fuddled and excited that I refused to go on, and sent him home. See what comes of benevolence. If I had let him play and rooked him, he wouldn't have had the opportunity of brooding over difficulties and putting an end to them. Again, you see there's nothing so unsafe as unselfishness."

Philip, remembering the notice of transfer he had found open by the dead man's side, wondered if matters might not have turned out differently had it been viewed by the calm light of day.

"Well, it can't be helped now," continued the speaker. "I don't approve of what has been done, but I'll do my best, — in fact I'm bound as executor — to clear the matter up. Though I'm sure I don't know where the inquiry may not lead me. It's an infernal nuisance, nothing less! Well, hand me over the papers and — I suppose you've no objection to my searching the office?"

"None; the Colonel's room is as he left it. I was afraid of noise so near the house." The speaker frowned at his own words, annoyed to find how thought for Belle crept into all his actions.

"So far, good. And look here, Marsden, if you value that girl's opinion go and tell her the downright truth. She will be able to see you this afternoon."

A piece of sound advice meant kindly, which had the not unusual effect of making the recipient hesitate about a course of action on which he had almost decided. In after years, when he considered the tangled clew Fate held at this time for his unwinding, he never hesitated to say, "Here I went wrong;" but at the time it seemed of small importance whether he saw the girl that day or the next. And once more the assumption of authority on John Raby's part irritated him into contradiction. "It will be a pity to disturb Miss Stuart's first day," he replied stiffly, and rode away.

The young civilian shrugged his shoulders. Philip Marsden wasn't a bad fellow on the whole, but a prig of the first water. Imagine any one gifted with a grain of common sense acting as he had done! Why, if he wanted the girl's good graces, had he not paid up the rest of the money and finished the whole affair? It was a long price to pay, of course, but it was better than giving ten thousand for nothing. Only a morbid self-esteem could have prevented him. Really, the sense of duty to be found in some people was almost enough to engender a belief in original sin. The mere struggle for existence could never have produced such a congeries of useless sentiment.

He threw himself into a chair determining to have a quiet cigar before tasking his brain with further thought about what he had just heard. But the first

glance at the daily paper which had just come in made him throw it from him in disgust; for it contained a fulsomely flattering notice extolling Major Marsden at the expense of Colonel Stuart, and openly hinting at discrepancies in the accounts which the former officer was determined to bring home to the latter. The style betrayed the hand of some clerk toadying for promotion; but style or no style, the matter was clear, and to be read by the million. It all came from Marsden's infernal sense of duty, and John Raby had half a mind to spoil his little game by sending the paper over to Belle as usual. But with all his faults he was not a spiteful man, or one inclined to play the part of dog-in-the-manger. Consequently when Lâlâ Shunker Dâs's carriage went over for Belle the *chuprassi* in charge only carried a bouquet; the newspaper remained behind, keeping company with John Raby and magnanimity.

Belle never noticed the omission, for she was still strangely forgetful and indifferent; even when she drove along the familiar road, she hardly remembered anything of her last dismal ride. Only one or two things showed distinctly in the midst of past pain; such trivial things as a crooked cross of flowers, and screaming parrots in a stormy sky. The rest had gone, to come back,— the doctor told John Raby — ere long; just now the forgetfulness was

best, though it showed how narrowly she had escaped brain-fever. So nobody spoke of the past, and while Philip was cherishing the remembrance of that first day, and using it to build up his belief in her trust, she was not even conscious that he had been the kindest among many kind.

Meanwhile Philip Marsden had not found himself in a bed of roses. The impossibility of seeing Belle left him a prey to uncertainty, and if he was ready fifty times a day to admit that he was in love, there were quite as many times when he doubted the fact. Yet love or no love, he was strenuously eager to save her from trouble; so his relief at finding the office in good order had been great. In regard to matters which had been in Colonel Stuart's own hands he naturally felt safe; the discovery of the deficiency therefore had been a most unpleasant shock, the more so because he saw at once that inquiry might make it necessary for him to betray his own action. He wearied himself fruitlessly with endeavours to discover any error, but the thought of hushing the matter up never occurred to him as possible. To some men it might have been a temptation; to him it was none, so he deserved no credit on that score. He told himself again that if Belle were what he deemed her, she would see the necessity of a report also; but then he was reckoning on perfection, and poor Belle, as it so happened, was in such a state of

nervous tension that she was utterly incapable of judging calmly about anything relating to her father.

She lay on the sofa after she returned from her drive, feeling all the dreariness of coming back to everyday life, and, in consequence, exalting the standard of her loss till the tears rolled quietly down her cheeks. Whereupon poor Healy's Mary Ann, full of the best intentions, brewed her a cup of tea, and sent over the road for the newspaper, which she imagined had been forgotten. The master of the house was out for his evening ride, and thus it came to pass that when he called on his way home, he found Belle studying the misleading paragraph with flushed cheeks and tearful eyes. "What does it mean?" she asked tempestuously. "What is it that he dares to say of father?"

With her pretty, troubled face looking into his John Raby washed his hands of further magnanimity. He refused to play the part of Providence to a man who could not look after his own interests, and whom, in a vague way, he felt to be a rival. So, considering Belle only, he told the modified truth, making as light as he could of the deficiency, and openly expressing his regret that it should ever have been reported, the more so because Major Marsden himself believed there was some mistake. This consolation increased her indignation.

"Do you mean to say," she cried, trembling with anger and weakness, "that he has dragged father's name in the dirt for a mistake? Why didn't he come to me, or to you? *We* would have told him it was impossible. But he always misjudged father; he hated him; he never would come here. Ah yes! I see it all now! I understand."

The "we" sounded sweetly in the young man's ears, but its injustice was too appalling to be passed over. He felt compelled to defence. For a moment he thought of telling the whole truth, but he reflected that Philip had a tongue as well as he, and that no one had a right to make free with another man's confidence. Consequently his palliation only referred to the culprit's well-known inflexibility and almost morbid sense of duty; all of which made Belle more and more angry, as if the very insistence on such virtues involved some depreciation of their quality in the dead man.

"I do not care what happens now," she said vehemently. "I know well enough that nothing he can say will harm father's good name; but I will never forgive him, never! It is no use excusing him; all you say only makes it more unnecessary, and cruel, and,— and stupid. I will never forgive him; no, never!"

And all that night she lay awake working herself into a fever, mental and bodily, by piling up the

many evidences in favour of her theory as to Philip's long-cherished enmity. He had never called, never spoken to them when all the world beside had been friendly. His very kindness to Dick was tainted; for had he not sided with the boy against her father? Once the train of thought started, it was easy to turn the points so that there seemed no possibility of its following any other line than the one she laid down for it as she went along. Finally, to clinch the matter, memory served her a sorry trick by suddenly recalling to her recollection Philip Marsden's gloomy face when she had told him who she was on their first meeting at the railway-station. She sat up in bed with little hot hands stretched into the darkness. "O father! father! I was the only one who loved you,— the only one!" A climax at once of sorrow and consolation which somehow soothed her to sleep.

Now, while she was employed in blackening his character, Philip Marsden was crediting her with all the cardinal virtues. He had not seen the daily paper, for reasons which put many other things out of his head for the time being. He had no idea when he wilfully went to play racquets that evening instead of following Raby's advice of seeing Belle, that he was throwing away his last chance of an interview; but as he sat outside the court, cooling himself after the game, an urgent summons came from the orderly-room. Ten minutes after he was

reading a telegram bidding the 101st Sikhs start to the front immediately. Farewell to leisure; for though the regiment had been under warning for service and in a great measure prepared for it, the next forty-eight hours were ones of exceeding bustle. Philip, harassed on all sides, had barely time to realise what it meant; and, despite a catch at his heart when he thought of Belle, the blood ran faster in his veins from the prospect of action. His own certainty, moreover, was so great, that it seemed almost incredible that one, of whose sympathy he felt assured, should see the matter with other eyes. Nevertheless he was determined to tell her all at the first opportunity; and often, as he went untiringly through the wearisome details of inspection, his mind was busy over the interview to come; but the end was always the same, and left him with a smile on his face.

John Raby happened to be standing in the verandah when, between pillar and post, Philip found that vacant five minutes which he had been chasing all day long.

"Can't see you, I'm afraid," he returned, cheerfully, to the inquiry for Miss Stuart. "The fact is she has worried herself into a fever over that paragraph. I don't wonder; it was infernal!"

"What paragraph?" asked Philip innocently.

John Raby looked at him and laughed, not a very

pleasant kind of laugh. "Upon my soul," he said, "you *are* an unlucky beggar. I begin to think it's a true case, for you've enough real bad luck to make a three-volume-course of true love run rough! So you haven't seen it? Then I'll fetch it out. The paper is just inside."

Philip, reining in his restive horse viciously, read the offending lines, punctuating them with admonitory digs of his heels and tugs at the bridle as the charger fretted at the fluttering paper. He looked well on horseback, and the civilian, lazily leaning against a pillar, admired him, dangling sword, jingling spurs, and all. He folded the paper methodically against his knee and handed it back. "And Miss Stuart believed all that?" he asked quietly.

"Women always believe what they see printed. She is in an awful rage, of course; but I warned you, Marsden, you know I did."

"You were most kind. Will you tell Miss Stuart, when you see her, that I called to say good-bye and that I was sorry,— yes! you can say I was sorry, for the cause of her fever." His tone was bitterness itself.

"Look here, Marsden," said the other, "don't huff; take my advice this time and write to her."

"Do you think the belief of women extends to what they see written? I didn't know you had such a high opinion of the sex, Raby! Well, good-bye to you, and thanks."

"Oh, I shall be down to see the 101st march out. Five A.M., isn't it?"

Philip nodded as he rode off. All through that last night in cantonments he was angry with everything and everybody, himself included. Why had he meddled? What demon had possessed the Brigadier to put him in charge of the Commissariat office? Why had not this order for the front come before? Why had it come now? What induced the *babu* who penned that paragraph to be born? And why did a Mission school teach him the misuse of adjectives? He was still too angry to ask himself why he had not taken John Raby's advice; that touched too closely on the real mistake to be acknowledged yet awhile.

The gloom on his face was not out of keeping with the scene, as the regiment marched down the Mall at early dawn while the band played *Zakhmi*, that plaintive lament of the Afghan maiden for her wounded lover. Yet there was no pitiful crowd of weeping women and children, such as often mars the spectacle of a British regiment going on service. The farewells had all been said at home, and if the women wept in the deserted lines, the men marched, eyes front without a waver, behind the sacred flag borne aloft by the tall drum-major, whose magnificent stature was enhanced by an enormous high-twined turban. Close at his heels went two men waving white silver-mounted whisks over the Holy

Grunth, watchful lest aught might settle on the sacred page which lay open on a yellow satin cushion borne by four sergeants. There, plainly discernible even by the half-light, was inscribed in broad red and black lettering the sure guide through death to life for its faithful followers. Then, separated by a wide blank from the book in front and the men behind, rode the Colonel. Finally, shoulder to shoulder, marched as fine a body of men as could be seen east or west, with dexterously knotted turbans neutralising the least difference in height, so that the companies came by as if carved out of one block.

It was a stirring sight, making the blood thrill, especially when, at the turn of the road leading to barracks, the bands of the British regiments formed in front to play their fellow soldiers out of the station, and the Sikhs broke into their old war cry, "*Jai! Jai! guru-ji ke Jai!* (Victory, victory, our Teachers' victory)." It mingled oddly with the strains of "The Girl I left Behind Me."

A little group of horsemen waited for the last farewells at the cantonment boundary, and one of them riding alongside told Philip Marsden that a clue had been found, and the truth would be made manifest. The conventional answer of pleasure came reluctantly, but as the hands of the two men met, the gloomy, troubled face looked almost wistfully into the clever, contented one. "You are very good to

her, Raby; I know that; good-bye." The workmanlike groans and shrieks of the fife and drum replaced the retiring bands, and as cheer after cheer greeted the final departure Philip Marsden felt that John Raby was left completely master of the situation.

That evening, twenty miles out among the sandhills, he put his pride in his pocket, impelled thereto by a persistent gnawing at his heart, and followed the advice of writing to Belle; an honest, if somewhat hard letter, telling her, not of his good deeds, but the truth of those which seemed to her bad. Ten days after at Peshawar, with the last civilised post he was to see for many weeks, his letter came back to him unopened and re-addressed in a shaky hand.

The heart-ache was better by that time. "She might have afforded me the courtesy of an envelope," he said as he threw the letter into the camp-fire.

CHAPTER IX.

THE clue spoken of by John Raby lay in the note for a thousand rupees with which Colonel Stuart had paid a portion of his card debts during his last deal in the great game. It proved to be not only one of the missing notes, but, as luck would have it, the very one about the number of which uncertainty existed. The figures stood as the Colonel had written them; so the mistake lay with the usurer, if it was really a mistake. John Raby lit a cigarette and meditated, with the list before him; but beyond an odd persistency in threes and fives, the figures presented no peculiarity. So he set the problem aside till he could tackle it on the spot where it had arisen; for he was a great believer in scenery as an aid to the senses.

The day was almost done, however, ere he found leisure for the task; nevertheless, fatigued as he was, he set to work methodically and was rewarded by the immediate discovery that uncertainty existed as to the number of another note, the one which had been paid in by some one else. The entry had been blotted by the hasty closing of the ledger, and though it read like 159934, it was quite conceivable that it

might be something else. Again those threes and fives! Idly enough he wrote the two uncertainties on a sheet of paper, and sat staring at them till suddenly a suggestion came to him, making him re-write the number given by Shunker in close imitation of the dead man's bold black figures, and then deliberately blot it by placing it in the ledger. The result bore so close a resemblance to the blurred entry that his quick brain darted off in a wonder how the usurer had got hold of the number of a note which he had not paid in. No reasonable explanation suggesting itself, he began a systematic search in the waste paper basket; the scraps there would at least tell him on what work the Colonel had been engaged during his last day. He knew that Shunker had had an interview with him in the morning, but that did not account for the shreds of a receipt for three thousand five hundred maunds of grain which he found almost on the top. An old receipt dated some months back; three thousand five hundred too — an odd coincidence! So far good; the next thing was to have a sight of Shunker's face before he had time to hear rumours or make plans.

The summons to come up for an interview early next morning rather pleased the Lâlâ, for he received it while at the receipt of custom, when it added to his importance in the eyes of the wedding guests who sat watching a nautch girl sidle, like a

pouter pigeon, over a strip of dirty carpet. She was stout to obesity; her oiled hair was plastered so as to narrow her forehead to a triangle; her voluminous skirts ended just under the arms in a superfluity of bust. She held one fat hand to her cheek persistently as if in the agonies of toothache, while she yelled away as if the dentist had failed to comfort her. Yet the best native society of Faizapore had sat there for an hour and a half with the impassive faces of the Asiatic bent on amusement; a face which surely will make Paradise dull work for the *houris*.

"Yea! I will come to Raby if he needs me," assented the rich man, turning with a spiteful chuckle to his right hand, where old Mahomed Lateef sat solemn and dignified. "See you, Khân *sahib*, how even the Sirkar favours money?"

"When I was young, Oh Shunker!" retorted the other grimly, "the hands of Nikalsane and Jan Larnee held the sword too tight to leave room for the rupees."

"Ay! when you Khâns of Kurtpore brought fifty swords to flash behind theirs, without payment. Swords are bought nowadays, and those who lack money must e'en go to the wall."

The old Mahomedan's eyes flared. "*Mashâllâh*, oh *buniah-ji*, if they go to the wall in my poor house they will find swords enow! But yesterday a hut fell — I mean 'twas pulled down for repairs — and

we came on five Persian blades![1] Ready to use, O Lâlâ-ji; no spot or blemish of rust. Haply they may help back the rupees some day."

Shunker moved uneasily in his chair, and the guests sank again into silence, broken only by the occasional tributary hiccup which native etiquette demands for the memory of dinner. The stars shone overhead, and a great trail of smoke from the brazier of oil and cotton-seed seemed to mix itself up with the Milky Way. Little Nuttu, the hero of the feast, had fallen asleep in his chair, his baby bride being engaged in cutting her teeth elsewhere. A group of younger men, squatted in the far corner round a flaring paraffin lamp, talked vociferously in a mixed jargon of "individual freedom," "political rights," and "representative government." And no one laughed or cried at anything; neither at the nautch girl with her unmentionable songs, nor the spectacle of people discussing freedom while engaged in taking it away from two harmless infants.

So the night wore on in dull dissipation, leaving Shunker at a disadvantage when he came to confront the young civilian's clear-cut, clean-shaven face in the morning.

"You have made a mistake, Lâlâ-ji," he began, opening fire at once; "a serious mistake about the notes you claim to have left with Colonel Stuart."

[1] A common occurrence in old Pathan houses.

So much, at least, was certain; John Raby, however, saw more in the unrestrained start of alarm which the surprise evoked. "It isn't so very serious," he continued blandly; "nothing for you to be so frightened about, Lâlâ-ji; we all make mistakes at times. By the way, did you keep your original memorandum of the numbers in English or Mâhâjani [accountant's character]?" "In Mâhâjani, *Huzoor*," bleated Shunker, and John Raby smiled. For this diminished the possibility of clerical error enormously; indeed it was to settle this point that he had sent for the usurer. "So much the better for you," he went on carelessly, "and if you will bring the paper to me this evening, say about six, I'll see if we can get the error in your claim altered. You have interchanged a five and a three in one number, and it is as well to be accurate before the inquiry commences. It will be a very stringent one. By the by, what time did you last see Colonel Stuart?"

But the usurer was prepared this time, and when he finally bowed himself out, John Raby was as much in the dark as ever in regard to the details of a plot which he felt sure had been laid.

All day long in a sort of under-current of thought he was busy ransacking memory and invention for a theory, coming back again and again, disheartened, to the half-tipsy laugh with which Colonel Stuart had given him the note, declaring it was a windfall.

A windfall! what could that mean! Had Shunker given it back? Then there must have been a second interview; but none of the servants could speak to one. He went over early to the office and sat in the dead man's chair trying to piece things together. The shadows were beginning to cling to the corners ere the usurer was announced, and something in the scared glance he gave towards the tall figure in the seat of office convinced John Raby that the man was reminded of another and similar visit to that room. The quaver in hand and voice with which he produced his day-book, and said that the *Huzoor's* number was right after all, clinched the matter.

"I suppose," remarked the young man coolly, "you were confused by the other note." A random shot, but it struck home!

"*Huzoor!*" faltered the fat man.

John Raby looked him full in the face, and went one better; poker was a game of which he was passionately fond. "The other note with the threes and the fives which you saw,— which you got when, — I mean the second time you came here — when you brought the receipt for the grain which he destroyed — By Jove!" He threw his hand up, and a light came into his face. "Fool not to see it before — the receipt, — the *wrong* receipt of course."

"But he never gave me the money; I swear he didn't!" protested Shunker, completely off his guard.

His hearer broke into a fit of cynical laughter. "Thank you, Shunker, thank you! Of course he gave you the money: I see it all; and as one of the numbers were different, you improved on your original memorandum, thinking you had made a mistake. Stay,— number 150034 wasn't your note. By Jove! he must have given you back the whole roll of four thousand five hundred by mistake. You're a bigger blackguard than I thought!"

"No, no!" cried the usurer, beside himself with fear of this *shaitan*. "Only three! I swear it! I only picked up three."

"Thank you again, Lâlâ. You picked up three. Let me see; how was it?" The young man rose, pacing the room quickly and talking rapidly. "Stuart must have taken four from the safe. The windfall! by George! the windfall. The Colonel must have thought Shunker had only taken two. Well! you're a nice sort of scoundrel," he went on, stopping opposite the usurer and viewing him with critical eyes. "So you gave him the wrong receipt on purpose, and now claim a second payment, is that it?"

Shunker collapsed to the floor as if every bone had left his body. "I didn't,— I'll swear by holy Ganges, by my son's head — I didn't mean it. I thought he would kill me, and I gave him the wrong receipt in my hurry. Oh, sir, I swear — "

"Let go my legs, you fool, or I shall! Stand up.

and don't let your teeth chatter. I'm not going to kill you. So you weren't even a good scoundrel, Shunker, only a pitiful fortune-finder. Having done a clever trick by mistake, you thought it safe to claim the money again, as the only witness was dead. And it was safe, but for that chance of the other note! It was hard luck, Lâlâ-ji, hard luck!"

There was something almost uncanny in John Raby's jeering smile as he threw himself into a chair and began to light one of his eternal cigarettes. The fact being that he was elated beyond measure at his own success, and unwilling to detract, as it were, from his own skill by any hint of carelessness on the other side.

"And now, Shunker," he asked, his chief attention being apparently given to his tobacco, "what do you intend to do?" Coolly as he spoke, he was conscious of inward anxiety; for he had rapidly reviewed the position, and confessed himself impotent should the usurer regain the courage of denial, since any attempt to prove the facts must bring to light his own possession of the unlucky note. His best chance therefore was to work on the Lâlâ's terror without delay.

"I throw myself on your honour's mercy," quavered the usurer in a dull despairing tone, knowing by experience that it was but a broken reed on which to rely.

"You don't deserve any; still there are reasons which incline me to be lenient. Your son is young to be deprived of a father's care; besides, as the Colonel *sahib's* executor, I do not wish to have a committee of inquiry in the office. You understand?"

"*Sahib*, I understand." This eminently sensible view of the matter was as welcome as it was unexpected.

"Therefore I shall be content if you withdraw your claim, in some credible way of course. Equally, of course, you will sign a confession, which I will burn when — "

"But, *sahib*, how —?"

"Not another word. I particularly do not wish to know what you are going to do; but I haven't lived seven years in India without being aware how things *can* be burked."

"If the *sahib* would only tell me — "

"I tell you to burke it! Why, man, if I only had *your conscience* all things would be possible; I'd make money even out of this. I'll help you so far. You have somehow or another to restore certain notes, the numbers of which are known. I happen to have traced one of these already, and you happen to have got hold of a wrong one. I will exchange. If you haven't got it about you,— ah! I see you have; that is a great saving of trouble."

A quarter of an hour later John Raby wrote a few lines to Major Marsden's successor enclosing a thousand-rupee note which he had found in an unexpected place in Colonel Stuart's office, adding his belief that the others would doubtless turn up ere long, and suggesting a few days' grace in order that a thorough search might be made.

"Never lie if you can help it," he said to himself sardonically. "That dear old prig Marsden would be shocked at my squaring this business, though at one stage of the proceedings he tried to do so himself. What the devil would be the good of an inquiry to any living soul? And as I've lost a thousand in avoiding one, no one could accuse me of interested motives. Marsden and I row in the same boat, and if I had had as much money as he has! — Well, she is a dear little girl, and that's a fact."

He called on the dear little girl after leaving the office, and comforted her greatly by general expressions of hope. They made her almost more grateful to him than any certainty would have done, for they showed a more perfect trust in her father's integrity. So even the young man's caution told in his favour, and he went home very well satisfied with himself, to await the final explanation that was to emanate from the Lâlâ's fertile brain. The notes would be found somewhere, no doubt; or else in looking over

his accounts he would discover a like sum owing to Government which would cause the disappearance of the apparent deficiency.

But amid all his terror, the Lâlâ had noted John Raby's assertion that, given a certain conscience, he could make money out of the restitution; and these idle words stood between him and many a solution of the difficulty. His soul (if he had one) was full of hate, a sense of defeat, and a desire for revenge. If only he could devise some plan by which he could retain the plunder, especially that thousand-rupee note the white-faced *shaitan* had given him in exchange!

Dawn found him still in the upper chamber alone with his faithful jackal. There was determination in his face and dogged resistance in Râm Lâl's.

"Fool!" whispered the usurer. "If I fall, where art thou? And I swear I will let the whole thing go. I have money,— thou hast none. It is only a year without opium or tobacco, Râmu, and the wife and children well cared for meanwhile. Are you going to back out of the agreement, unfaithful to salt?"

"A year is ten years without opium, Lâlâ; and there is no need for this. I am the scapegoat, it is true, but only for safety."

"Son of owls!" cursed the usurer, still under his breath. "It *is* for safety, thy safety as well as mine.

For if thou wilt do as I bid thee, it will tie that *shaitan's* hands; and if they be not tied, they will meddle. Besides, the *sahib-logue* are never satisfied without a scapegoat, and if some one go not to jail they will inquire; and then, Râmu, wilt thou fare better? 'Twill be longer in the cells, that is all. Opium can be smuggled, Râmu! See, I promise five rupees a month to the warder, and a big caste dinner when thou returnest from the father-in-law's house [a native euphemism for the jail]. And listen, Râmu — "

So the whispered colloquy went on and on through the hot night, and during the course of the next day John Raby was asked to sign a search-warrant for the house of one Râmu Lâl, who was suspected by his master, Shunker Dâs, of having stolen the missing notes from Colonel Stuart's office-table. For a moment the young man, taken aback by this unexpected turn of affairs, hesitated; but reflection showed him that, for all he could prove to the contrary, the crime might have been committed. At least there would be time enough for interference at a later stage of the proceedings. So Râmu and his house were searched; a note for five hundred rupees was found on his person, and two previous convictions against him promptly produced by the police.

The discovery of but one, and that the smallest, note gave John Raby the key to Shunker's plan;

for if it could be proved that the money had been stolen after it had been duly handed over to the Commissariat officer, the Lâlâ's claim would remain intact. Thus he would be the gainer by exactly three thousand rupees. Some of this would of course go towards indemnifying the scapegoat; but Râmu was notoriously the contractor's jackal, and bound to take such risks.

What was to be done? It was maddening to be outwitted in this manner, but after all no one was really the worse for it. Râmu had evidently been squared: Shunker was bound to escape in any case; and Government had gained all round. Practically speaking, he and Marsden were the only sufferers; the latter in having paid up ten thousand rupees which the authorities must otherwise have lost; he, in having restored one thousand out of his honest earnings. Besides, he had forced Shunker to disgorge another five hundred; in fact, but for him and his *écarté* the fraud could not have been discovered. Surely that was enough for any man to do; especially as one disclosure must lead to another, and in that case Government would have to pay Marsden back his money. All of which devious but straightforward arguments ended in John Raby taking care that the case should be tried in another court; which it was and successfully. Râm Lâl, confronted by a mass of evidence ingeniously compounded after

native fashion from truth and falsehood,— from the denials of honest people who could not possibly have seen anything, and the assertions of those who were paid to have seen everything,— pleaded guilty to having watched his master give the money to Colonel Stuart, who, being in a hurry, had placed it in an envelope-box on the writing-table, whence Râmu, returning after dark, had taken it "in a moment of forgetfulness" [the usual native excuse].

Here the Lâlâ interrupted the Court to say in a voice broken by emotion that Râmu was a faithful servant, a very faithful servant indeed.

So the jackal got eighteen months for the theft, and Shunker drove down next morning to the jail on a visit of inspection and took the opportunity of presenting one of the warders with five rupees.

The net result of the whole affair, from a monetary (that is to say from John Raby's) point of view, being that Shunker gained three thousand rupees, the Government six thousand and odd, while Philip Marsden lost over nine, and he himself forfeited one. He did not count other gains and losses; not even when a day or two after the trial he stood, with Belle's hand in his, saying good-bye to her ere she departed to the hills. The *gharri* waited with its pile of luggage outside in the sunlight; poor Healy's Mary Ann, who was to accompany her to Rajpore, was arranging the pillows and fussing over the

position of the ice-box which was to ensure comfort.

"I can't thank you," said the girl tearfully, her pretty eyes on his. "I wish I could, but I can't."

"Perhaps you may,— some day," he replied vaguely, wishing it were possible. "After all I did nothing; it was clear from the first that there was a mistake."

"Some people did not see the clearness," she returned bitterly. "So your kindness,— and — and confidence — were all the more welcome. I shall never forget it."

Once more the young civilian was driven, by sheer keenness of perception, to the position of an outsider who, seeing the game, sees the odds also. "If I were you I'd forget all about it," he said, more earnestly than was his wont. "It has been a bad dream from beginning to end. When we all come back from the wars with a paucity of limbs and a plethora of medals we can begin afresh. You look surprised. The fact is I've just accepted a political berth with one of the forces, and am off at once. I am glad; Faizapore will be dull when you are gone."

"What a nice young gentleman a' be, miss," said poor Healy's Mary Ann when he had seen them safely stowed away, and with a plunge and a wild tootle of the coachman's horn they were dashing out of the gate. "So cheerful like. He must a' suf-

fered a deal 'imself for to keep up 'is sperrits so in trouble. It's wonderful what one gets used to."

"He has been very good to me,—and to father," replied Belle softly.

CHAPTER X.

A COLD wind swept down the Peirâk valley, driving the last leaves from the birch trees, which, filling the gully, crept some short way up the steep ascent to the Pass, where the ridges of grey-blue slate seemed almost a part of the staring blue sky against which they showed like a serrated line of shadow. Nearer at hand the slopes of withered bent were broken by sharp fang-like rocks gathering themselves in the distance into immature peaks and passes. Here and there a patch of dirty snow, having borne the burden and heat of summer, lay awaiting a fresh robe of white at the hands of the fast-coming winter. Already the round black tents of the pasture-seeking tribes were in full retreat to the plains, and the valley lay still and silent, without even the sweep of a hawk in its solitary circle, or the bird-like whistle of a marmot sunning itself on the rocks. Ere long the snow would wrap all in its soft white mantle, and the bunting, paired with its own shadow, flicker over the glistening drifts.

Notwithstanding the lateness of the season the Peirâk was not utterly deserted. In a sheltered bit behind a cluster of rocks sat two young men. One,

despite the sheepskin coat and turban-wound peaked cap of the Afghan, showed unmistakable signs of alien blood in the steady gaze of a pair of brown eyes, and a white line of clean skin where the fur collar met his neck. It was our old friend Dick Smith, and he was on the watch for the last British regiment which was to cross the Pass in order to strengthen the little garrison beyond, before winter set her silver key upon the mountains. His companion carried his nationality in his face, for even when Afzul Khân had condescended to wear the uniform of a Sikh soldier no one could have mistaken the evidence of his long, straight nose and cruel, crafty expression, in which, however, lurked little hint of sensuality.

"You are deeply interested in this particular regiment," remarked Dick in fair Pushtu. "What's up, Afzul?"

"Nothing, *Huzoor*. A fool who called himself my relative took service once with your Sirkar. Mayhap in this regiment — God knows! It does not matter if it was."

The studied indifference made his hearer smile. "You are a queer lot, you Pathans," he said lazily. "Not much family affection; not much welcome for a long-lost brother, eh, Afzul?"

"The Presence should remember there are Pathans and Pathans. He has not seen my people; they are

not here." He spread a well-shaped nervous hand emphatically east, west, and south.

"Tarred with the same brush north, I expect," muttered the Englishman to himself.

Afzul Khân frowned. "These are my enemies," he went on. "But for the Sirkar,— *chk!*" He gave a curious sound, half click, half gurgle, and drew an illustrative finger across his throat. It was rather a ghastly performance.

"Then why stop?"

Afzul Khân plucked at the withered bents carelessly. "Because — because it suits this slave; because the merciful Presence is my master; because I may as well wait here as anywhere else."

"What are you waiting for?"

He showed all his long white teeth in a grin. "Promotion, *Huzoor*. It should come speedily, since but yesterday the *sahib* said I was worth all the rest of the gang."

"I must be more careful. Where the dickens did you pick up English, Afzul?"

"From you, *Huzoor*." A statement so irredeemably fictitious that it made Dick thoughtful.

"You're sharp enough, Heaven knows; but I don't understand why you wanted to learn signalling. Are you going to give up your *jezail* and become a *bâbu?*"

Afzul Khân fingered the matchlock which lay

beside him. "I have changed my mind," he said shortly. "I will leave it to the Presence to bring down fire from Heaven; *I* bring it from this flash-in-the-pan."

"Now what can you know about Prometheus?"

He shook his head. "The Presence speaks riddles. The fire comes to some folk, to many of the *sahibs* — to you, perhaps. God knows! The Pathans are different. Our work is fighting."

Dick, looking at his companion's sinewy strength, thought it not unlikely. "While we are waiting, Afzul," he said idly, "tell me the finest fight you ever were in. Don't be modest; out with it!"

"Wherefore not? Victory is Fate, and only women hang their heads over success. The best fight, you say? 'Twas over yonder to the north. There is a dip; but one way up and down. Twenty of us Barakzais and they were fifteen; but they were ahead of us in count, for, by Allah! their wives were so ugly that we didn't care to carry them off."

"Why should you?"

"'Twas a feud. Once, God knows when, a Budakshân Nurzai carried off one of ours and began it. If the women ran out, we killed the men instead. So it was a moonlight night, and the fifteen were fast asleep, snoring like hogs. By Allah! my heart beat as we crept behind the rocks on our bellies, knowing that a rolling stone might waken them.

But God was good, and *chk!* they bled to death, like the pigs they were, before their eyes were wide open."

Dick Smith stared incredulously. "You call that the best fight you ever were in? I call it—" The epithet remained unspoken as he started to his feet with a shout. "By George! I see the glitter. Yonder, Afzul! by the turn. Hurrah! hurrah!"

He was off at long swinging strides, careless of the fact that the Pathan never moved. The latter's keen eyes followed the lad with a certain regret, and then turned to the straggling file of soldiers now plainly visible.

"Marsden *sahib* with the advance guard," he muttered. "Why did I give in to those cursed hawk's eyes when my bullet was all but in his heart! *Wahillah!* his bravery made me a coward, and now my life is his. But I will return it, and then we shall cry quits. Yonder's the *subadâr*. By God! my knife will be in his big belly ere long, and some of those gibing Punjâbis shall jest no more."

So he watched them keenly with a fierce joy, while Dick tore down the hill, to be brought, by an ominous rattle among the rifles below, to a remembrance of his dress. Then he waited, hands down, in the open, until the advance guard came within hail of his friendly voice; when he received the whole regiment with open arms, as if the Peirâk were his special

property. Perhaps he had some right to consider it so, seeing that he was the only Englishman who had ever attempted to make those barren heights his head-quarters. But, as he explained to Philip Marsden, while they climbed the narrow gully hemmed in by perpendicular rocks which led to the summit, the breaks in communication from storms and other causes had been so constant, that he had cut himself adrift from head-quarters at Jumwar in order to be on the spot, and so avoid the constant worry of small expeditions with an escort: without which he was not allowed to traverse the unsettled country on either side.

"Here I am safe enough," he said with a laugh; "and if I could only get my assistant, a Bengali *bâbu*, to live at the other hut I have built on the northern descent, we could defy all difficulties. But he is in such a blind funk that if I go out he retires to bed and locks the door. The only time he is happy is when a regiment is on the road."

"Then his happiness is doomed for this year,—unless you use discretion and come on with us to Jumwar. I doubt your being safe here much longer."

Dick shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps not, and of course I shall have to cut and run before the snow; but I like the life, and it gives me time. I've been at work on a field-instrument—" here his eyes

lit up, and his tongue ran away with him over insulators and circuits.

Major Marsden looked at the lad approvingly, thinking how different he was from the slouching sullen boy of six months back. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Dick," he said with a half-smile; "but I've no doubt it will be very useful, if, as you say, it enables you to tap the wires anywhere with speed and certainty."

Dick gave a fine blush. "I beg your pardon, but these things get into my head. It will work though, I'm sure of it. I'd show you if it was here, but I left it at the other shanty. There's a stretch of low level line across the Pass where I was testing it."

The half-aggrieved eagerness in his voice made Philip smile. They were sitting together under the lee of a rock on the summit while a halt was called, in order to give time for the long caravan-like file, encumbered by baggage ponies, to reach the top and so ensure an unbroken line during the descent. For in these mountain marches the least breach of continuity is almost certain to bring down on the detached portion an attack from the robbers who are always on the watch for such an opportunity.

"You had best come with us, Dick," said Philip, returning to the point after a pause.

"No! The fact is I want to be certain of the communication until you are safe in Jumwar. Those

two marches, between your next camp and the city, are risky. I have my doubts of the people."

"Doubts shared by head-quarters apparently, for the chief got a telegram yesterday to await orders at Jusraoli. I expect they are going to send to meet us from Jumwar."

"I wish I'd known in time," replied Dick lightly; "in that case there is not much reason for staying. Yet I don't know; I'd rather stick on till I am forced to quit."

"That won't be long; the snow's due already, and you are coming on with us so far in any case, aren't you?"

Dick sat idly chucking stones and watching them leap from point to point of the cliffs below him. "I don't think I shall, if you are to be in camp Jusraoli for some days. You see, my *bâbu* is no use, and something might turn up. I'll see you across the Pass and come back. I could join you later on if I made up my mind to cut." He lay back with his arms under his head and looked up into the brilliant blue cloudless sky. "Major," he said suddenly, after a pause, "do you know that you have never asked after Belle?"

"Haven't I? The fact is I had news of her lately. Raby wrote to me a few days ago."

"I wouldn't trust Raby if I were you. Did he tell you that Belle hadn't a penny and was trying to be independent of charity by teaching?"

"I am very sorry to hear it."

Dick sat up with quite a scared look on his honest face. "I thought there must be something wrong between you two by her letters," he said in a low voice; "but I didn't think it was so bad as that. What is it?"

"Really, my dear boy, I don't feel called upon to answer that question."

"It's beastly impertinent, of course," allowed Dick; "but see here, Major, you are the best friend I have, and she,— why, I love her more dearly every day. So you see there must be a mistake."

The logic was doubtful, but the faith touched Philip's heart. "And so you love her more than ever?" he asked evasively.

"Why not? I seem somehow nearer to her now, not so hopelessly beneath her in every way. And I can help her a little by sending money to Aunt Lucilla. *She* wouldn't take a penny, of course. But they tell me that when my grandfather,— I mean my mother's father — dies I might come in for a few rupees; so I have made my will leaving anything in your charge for Belle. You don't mind, do you?"

Philip Marsden felt distinctly annoyed. Here was fate once again meddling with his freedom. "I'm afraid I do. To begin with, I may be lying with a bullet through me before the week's out."

"So may I. Look on it as my last request, Major.

I'd sooner trust you than any one in the wide world. You would be certain to do what I would like."

"Should I? I'm not so sure of myself. Look here, Dick! I didn't mean to tell you, but perhaps it is best to have it out, and be fair and square. The fact is we are rivals." He laughed cynically at his hearer's blank look of surprise. "Yes,— don't be downcast, my dear fellow; you've a better chance than I have, any day, for she dislikes me excessively; and upon my word, I believe I'm glad of it. Let's talk of something more agreeable. Ah, there goes the bugle."

He started to his feet, leaving Dick a prey to very mixed emotions, looking out with shining eyes over the dim blue plains which rolled up into the eastern sky. It must be a mistake, he felt. His hero was too perfect for anything else; and she? Something seemed to rise in his throat and choke him. So nothing further was said between them till on the northern skirts of the hills they stood saying good-bye. Then Dick with some solemnity put a blue official envelope into his friend's hand. "It's the will, Major. I think it's all right; I got the *bâbu* to witness it. And of course the — the other — doesn't make any difference. You see I shall write and tell her it is all a mistake."

The older man as he returned the boyish clasp felt indescribably mean. "Don't be in a hurry, Dick,"

he said slowly. "You can think it over and give it me when you join us, for join us you must. I won't take it till then, at all events. As for the other, as you call it, the mistake would be to have it changed. Whatever happens she will never get anything better than what you give her, Dick — never! — never! Good-bye; take care of yourself."

As he watched the young fellow go swinging along the path with his head up, he told himself that others beside Belle would be the losers if anything happened to Dick Smith; who, for all the world had cared, might at that moment have been lying dead-drunk in a disreputable bazaar. "There is something," he thought sadly, "that most men lose with the freshness of extreme youth. It has gone from me hopelessly, and I am so much the worse for it." And Dick, meanwhile, was telling himself with a pang at his heart that no girl, Belle least of all, could fail in the end to see the faultlessness of his hero.

CHAPTER XI.

THE sun had set ere Dick reached the narrowest part of the defile where, even at midday, the shadows lay dark; and now, with the clouds which had been creeping up from the eastward all the afternoon obscuring the moon, it looked grim and threatening. He was standing at an open turn, surprised at the warmth of the wind that came hurrying down the gully, when the low whistling cry of the marmot rang through the valley and died away among the rocks. A second afterwards the whizz of a bullet, followed by the distant crack of a rifle, made him drop in his tracks and seek the shelter of a neighbouring boulder. Once again the marmot's cry arose, this time comparatively close at hand. To answer it was the result of a second's thought, and the silence which ensued convinced Dick that he had done the right thing. But what was the next step? Whistling was easy work, but how if he met some of these musical sentries face to face? Perhaps it would be wiser to go back. He had almost made up his mind to this course when the thought that these robbers, for so he deemed them, might out of pure mischief have tampered with his beloved wires came

to turn the balance in favour of going on. A disused path leading by a *détour* to the southern side branched off about a mile further up; if he could reach that safely he might manage to get home without much delay. Only a mile; he would risk it. Creeping from his shelter cautiously he resumed his way, adopting the easy lounging gait of the hill-people; rather a difficult task with the inward knowledge that some one may be taking deliberate aim at you from behind a rock. More than once, as he went steadily onwards, the cry of a bird or beast rose out of the twilight, prompting his instant reply. "If they would only crow like a cock," he thought, with the idle triviality which so often accompanies grave anxiety, "I could do that first-class."

Yet he was fain to pause and wipe the sweat from his face when he found himself safely in the disused track, and knew by the silence that he was beyond the line of sentries. A rough road lay before him, but he traversed it rapidly, being anxious to get the worst of it over before the lingering light deserted the peaks. As he stood on the summit he was startled at the lurid look of the vast masses of cloud which, rolling up to his very feet, obscured all view beyond. They were in for a big storm, he thought, as he hurried down the slopes at a break-neck pace; with all his haste barely reaching the shanty in time, for a low growl of thunder greeted his arrival, and

as he pulled the latch a faint gleam of light showed him the empty room. He called loudly; darkness and silence: again, as he struck a match; light, but still silence. Quick as thought, Dick was at the signaller, and the electric bell rang out incongruously. *Tink-a-tink-a-tink* was echoed from the eastward. But westward? He waited breathlessly, while not a sound returned to him. Communication was broken; the wires had possibly been cut, and Dick stood up with a curiously personal sense of injury. His wires tampered with out of sheer mischief! Yet stay! Might it not be something more? Where the devil had the *bâbu* hidden himself? After fruitless search an idea struck him, and he signalled eastward once more. "Repeat your last message, giving time at which sent." With ears attuned to tragedy Dick awaited the reply. "6 P.M. To north side. 'Will send cocoa-nut oil and curry stuff by next mail.'"

The echo of Dick's laughter, as he realised that but an hour or so before the *bâbu* had been putting the telegraph to commissariat uses, was the last human sound the shanty was to hear for many a long day. For the next moment's thought roused a sudden fear. The *bâbu* had doubtless gone over the Pass with the troops for the sake of company; that was natural enough, but if he was still in the north shanty awaiting Dick's return, why had he not answered the signal sent westward? It could not be

due to any break in the wire, unless the damage had been done after dark, for he had been able to telegraph eastward not so long ago. Was there more afoot than mere mischief?

It was not a night for a dog to be out in, and as Dick stood at the door he could see nothing but masses of cloud hurrying past, softly, silently. Then suddenly a shudder of light zig-zagged hither and thither, revealing only more cloud pierced by a few pinnacles of rock.

Not a night for a dog certainly; but for a man, with a man's work before him? Belle would bid him go, he knew. A minute later he had closed the door behind him, and faced the Pass again. Ere he reached the end of the short ascent it was snowing gently; then, with a furious blast, hailing in slanted torrents that glittered like dew-drops in the almost ceaseless shiver of the silent lightning. Everything was so silent, save for the wind which, caught and twisted in the gullies, moaned as if in pain. Ah! was that the end of all things? Round him, in him, through him, came a blaze of white flame, making him stagger against the wall of rock and throw up his hands as if to ward off the impalpable mist which held such a deadly weapon. Half-blinded he went on, his mind full of one thought. If that sort of thing came again, say when he was passing the snow-bridge, could a man stand it without a start which

must need instant help! The question left no room for anything save a vague wonder that it was needed in the afternoon. Then the sickening "lightning-sudden" grown by the nurses to the telegraph-clerks struck him as being happy, and Ethel's reference to fire from heaven passed through his mind. More like ice from hell struck, with that horrible sulphurous smell, and now and again a ghastly underground rumble like the mutter of fiends. There again! Wider this time, and followed by a rattle as it murkily. But the snow which was now sweeping thick in white swirls seemed to shroud even the lightning. Horrible! To have so much light and to be able to see nothing but cloud and the snow at your feet. How long would he see them? How long would it be before the snow obliterated the path, leaving him lost? He stumbled along, tugging at his very finger-ends despite the cold which grew with every step. The very hair on his fur mask stood on end, and his brain swam with a wild excitement. On and on recklessly, yet steadily: his footsteps deadened by the drifting snow, until he stood at the threshold of shelter and threw open the door of the cabin.

Great Heaven, what was this! The fire, green with heat, warming the sapphire, while Adrian Eldon, surrounded by six or seven armed Indians, stood

over him with drawn knife. "Go on, you fool!" he was saying, "your work is nearly finished."

The full meaning of the scene flashed through Dick Smith's excited brain quicker than any lightning. Treachery was at work, with a coward for its agent. His revolver was out in a second, and before the astonished group had time to grasp the unexpected interruption, the *bâbu's* nerveless fingers slipped from the handles, as with a gasping sob, rising above the report, he sank in a heap on the floor.

"By God and His Prophet!" cried Afzul, carried away, as men of his kind are, by the display of daredevil boldness which is their unattained ideal of bravery. "Yea, by the twelve Imaums, but it was well done."

"Liar, traitor, unfaithful to salt!" cried Dick, whose extraordinary appearance and absolutely reckless behaviour inspired his hearers with such awe that for the moment they stood transfixed. The revolver was levelled again, this time at Afzul, when the memory of other things beside revenge sobered the lad, and a flash of that inspiration which in time of danger marks the leader of men from his fellows made him throw aside the weapon and fold his arms. "No!" he said coolly, "I am faithful. I have eaten the salt of the Barakzais; they are my friends."

"Don't hurt the lad," cried Afzul, not a moment too soon, for cold steel was at Dick's throat. "God

smite you to eternal damnation, Haiyât! Put up that knife, I say. The lad's words are true. He has eaten of our salt, and we of his. He hath lived among us and done no harm to man or maid. By Allah! the lightning has got into his brain. Bind him fast; and mark you, 'twill be worse than death for him to lie here helpless, knowing that the wires he made such a fuss about have lured his friends to death. I know his sort. Death? — this will be seventy hells for him; and we can kill him after, if needs be."

Dick, as he felt the cords bite into his wrists and ankles, ground his teeth at the man's jeering cruelty. "Kill me outright, you devils!" he cried, struggling madly. It was the wisest way to ensure life, for the sight of his impotent despair amused his captors.

"Give him a nip of his own brandy, Haiyât, or he will be slipping through our fingers," said one, as he lay back exhausted.

"Not I; the bottle's near empty as it is."

Tales of his boyhood about drunken guards and miraculous escapes recurred to Dick's memory, and though he felt to the full the absurdity of mixing them up with the present deadly reality, the slenderest chance gave at least room for hope. "There is plenty more in the cupboard," he gasped. "The key is in my pocket."

"True is it, O Kâreem, that the Feringhi infidel

cannot die in peace without his *sharâb*," remarked Haiyât virtuously. But he did not fail with the others to taste all the contents of the cupboard, even to a bottle of Pain-killer which had belonged to the *bâbu*. Meanwhile Dick, lying helpless and bound, felt a fierce surge of hope and despair as he remembered that behind those open doors lay something which could put an end to treachery. Five minutes with his field-instrument in the open, and, let what would come afterwards, he would have done his work. The thought gave Dick an idea which, if anything, increased the hopelessness of his position, for the only result of his offer to work the wires on condition of his life being saved, was to drive Afzul, who saw his dread of Dick's getting his hands on the instrument in danger of being over-ruled, into settling the question, once and for all, by severing the connection with a hatchet.

"I know him better than that," he said; "he would sit and fool us until he had given warning. Let him lie there; if he has sense, he will sleep."

There was something so significant in his tone that Dick felt wisdom lay in pretending to follow the advice. He strained his ears for every whispered word of the gang as they crouched round the fire, and gathered enough to convince him that the sudden change of plan at head-quarters had endangered some deep-laid scheme of revenge, and that Afzul Khân,

believing Dick had gone on to the camp, had suggested a false telegram in order to lure the regiment into the open. A frantic rage and hate for the man who had suggested such a devilish prostitution of what constituted Dick's joy and pride roused every fibre of the lad's being. Lecoq, that greatest of examples to prisoners, declares that given time, pluck, and a cold chisel, the man who remains a captive is a fool. But how about the cold chisel? Dick's eyes, craftily searching about under cover of the failing fire-light, saw many things which might be useful, but all out of reach.

"I am cold," he said boldly: "bring me a rug or move me out of the draught."

They did both, in quick recognition of his spirit, and, with a laugh and an oath to the effect that the dead man would be a warm bed-fellow, dragged him beside the wretched *bâbu* and threw a sheepskin rug over both. Dick's faint hope of some carpenter's tools in the far corner fled utterly; but his heart leaped up again as he remembered that his cowardly subordinate had always gone about armed with revolvers and bowie-knives. Rifling a dead man's pockets with your hands tied behind your back is slow work, but the rug covered a multitude of movements. Half an hour afterwards Dick's feet were free, and with the knife held fast between his heels he was breaking his back in obstinate determination

of some time and somehow severing the rope upon his wrists. Some time and somehow — it seemed hours; yet when he managed at last with bleeding hands to draw the watch from his pocket he found it was barely two o'clock. Hitherto his one thought had been freedom; now he turned his mind towards escape. There was still plenty of time for him to reach the camp ere dawn found the regiment on the move; but the risks he might have to run on the way decided him, first of all, to try and secure his field-instrument from the cupboard. He lay still for a long time wondering what to do next, furtively watching Afzul Khân as he busied himself over the fire, while the others dozed preparatory to the work before them. Having possessed himself also of the dead *bâbu's* revolver, Dick felt mightily inclined to risk all by a steady shot at Afzul, and immediate flight. But the remembrance of those sentries on the downward road prevented him from relying altogether on his speed of foot. Yet Dick knew his man too well to build anything on the chance of either wine or weariness causing Afzul to relax his watch. It had come to be a stand-up fight between these two, a state of affairs which never fails to develop all the resources of brain and body. Dick, keenly alive to every trivial detail, noticed first a longer interval in the replenishing of the fire, and then the fact that but a few small logs of wood remained in

the pile. Thereafter, whenever Afzul's right hand withdrew fresh fuel, Dick's left under cover of the noise made free with more. The sheepskin rug had shelter for other things than a dead body and a living one.

"It burns like a fat Hindoo," muttered the Pathan, sulkily, as the last faggot went to feed the flame. "Lucky there is more in the outhouse, or those fools would freeze to death in their sleep."

Dick's heart beat like a sledge-hammer. His chance, the only chance, had come! Almost before the tall figure of the Pathan, after stooping over him to make sure that he slept, had ceased to block the doorway, Dick was at the cupboard. A minute's, surely not more than a minute's delay, and he was outside, safe and free, with the means of warning carefully tucked inside his fur coat.

Too late! Right up the only possible path came Afzul, carrying a great armful of sticks. To rush on him unprepared, tumble him backwards into a snowdrift alongside, deal him a crashing blow or two for quietness' sake and cram his *pugree* into his mouth, was the work of a minute; the next he was speeding down the descent with flying feet. The storm was over, and the moon riding high in the heavens shone on a white world; but already the darkness of the peaks against the eastern sky told that the dawn was not far off.

The first dip of the wires, he decided, was too close for safety, besides the drifts always lay thickest there. The next, a mile and a half down the valley, was best in every way; and as he ran, the keen joy of victory, not only against odds but against one man, came to him with the thought of Afzul Khân gagged and helpless in the snow. But he had reckoned without the cold; the chill night air which, finding its way through the open door, soon roused the sleepers by the ill-replenished fire. Haiyât, waking first, gave the alarm, and the discovery of their leader half suffocated in the snowdrift followed swiftly. Yet it was not until the latter, slowly recovering speech, gasped out a warning, that the full meaning of their prisoner's escape was brought home to them.

"After him! Shoot him down!" cried Afzul, staggering to his feet. "He can bring fire from heaven! If he touches the wires all is lost. Fool that I was not to kill him, the tiger's cub, the hero of old! Curse him, true son of Byramghor, born of the lightning!" So with wild threats, mingled with wilder words of wonder and admiration, Afzul Khân, still dazed by the blows Dick had dealt him, stumbled along in rear of the pursuit.

The latter's heart knew its first throb of fear when the signal he sent down the severed wire brought no reply. After all, was the outcome of long months

of labour, the visible embodiment of what was best in him, about to fail in time of need? Again and again he signalled, urgently, imperiously, while his whole world seemed to wait in breathless silence. Failure! No, no, incredible, impossible; not failure after all! Suddenly, loud and clear, came an answering trill, bringing with it a joy such as few lives know. A shout from above, a bullet whistling past him; scarcely fair that, when his hands were busy, and his mind too, working methodically, despite those yelling fiends tearing down the slope. "*Major from Dick — treachery.*" Something like a red-hot iron shot through his leg as he knelt on the cliff, a clear mark against the sky. Lucky, he thought, it was not through his arm. "*For God's sake —*" He doubled up in sudden agony but went on "*Stand fast.*"

There was still a glint of life left in him when Afzul Khân, coming up behind the butchers, claimed the death-blow. Their eyes met. "Fire — from — heaven!" gasped Dick, and rolled over dead. The Pathan put up his knife gloomily. "It is true," he said with an oath. "I knew he was that sort; he has beaten us fairly."

An hour afterwards, heralded by winged clouds flushed with the ceaseless race of day, the steady sun climbed the eastern sky and looked down brightly on the dead body of the lad who had given back his

spark of divine fire to the Unknown. Perhaps, if bureaucracy had not seen fit to limit genius within statutory bounds, Dick Smith might have left good gifts behind him for his generation, instead of taking them back with him to the storehouse of Nature. And the sun shone brightly also on Belle Stuart's bed; but not even her dreams told her that her best chance of happiness lay dead in the snow. She would not have believed it, even if she had been told.

CHAPTER XII.

It was a walled garden full of blossoming peach-trees, and chequered with little rills of running water beside which grew fragrant clumps of golden-eyed narcissus. In the centre was a slender-shafted, twelve-arched garden-house, with overhanging eaves, and elaborate fret-work, like wooden lace, between the pillars. On the sides of the stone daïs on which the building stood trailed creepers bright with flowers, and in front of the open archway serving as a door lay the harmonious puzzle of a Persian carpet rich in deep reds and yellows. Easy-chairs, with a fox-terrier curled up on one of them, and a low gipsy table ominously ringed with marks of tumblers, showed the presence of incongruous civilisation.

From within bursts of merriment and the clatter of plates and dishes, without which civilisation cannot eat in comfort, bore witness that dinner was going on. Then, while the birds were beginning to say good-night to each other, the guests came trooping out in high spirits, ready for coffee and cigars. All, with one exception, were in the *khâki* uniform which repeated washing renders, and always will render, skewbald, despite the efforts of martial

experts towards a permanent dye. Most of the party were young and deeply engrossed by the prospect of some sky-races, which, coming off next day, were to bring their winter sojourn at Jumwar to a brilliant close. One, a lanky boy with pretensions to both money and brains, was drawing down on himself merciless chaff by a boastful allusion to former stables he had owned.

"Don't believe a syllable he says," cried his dearest friend. "I give you my word they were all screws. Stable, indeed! Call it your tool-chest, Samuel, my boy."

Lieutenant Samuel Johnson, whose real name of Algernon, bestowed on him by his godfathers and godmothers in his baptism, had been voted far too magnificent for everyday use, blinked his white eyelashes in evident enjoyment of his own wit as he retorted: "Well, if they were screws I turned 'em myself. You buy yours ready made."

"Well done, Samivel! Well done! You're improving," chorused the others with a laugh.

"You might lend me that old jest-book, Sam, now that you've got a new one," replied his opponent calmly. "I'm running short of repartees,— and of cigars, too, bad cess to the Post! By Jove! I wish I had the driving of those runners; I'd hurry them up!"

"Man does not live by cigars alone. I'm dead

broke for boots," interrupted another, looking disconsolately at the soles and uppers which not all the shameless patching of an amateur artist could keep together.

"I have the best of you there," remarked some one else. "I got these at Tom Turton's sale. They wouldn't fit any one else."

"Yes, poor Tom had small feet."

There was a pause among the light-hearted youngsters as if the grim Shadow which surrounded that blossoming garden had crept a bit nearer.

"This is delightful," said John Raby, the only civilian present, as he lay back in his easy-chair which was placed beyond the noisy circle. His remark was addressed to Philip Marsden, who leaned against one of the octagonal turrets which like miniature bastions flanked the platform. "I shall be quite sorry to leave the place," continued Raby. "It's a perfect paradise."

In truth it was very beautiful. The pink and white glory of the peach blossoms blent softly into the snow-clad peaks, now flushed by the setting sun; while a level beam of light, streaming in through a breach in the wall, lit up the undergrowth of the garden, making the narcissus shine like stars against the dark green shadows.

"Doubtless," remarked Philip, "— for a Political who comes with the swallows and summer. You

should have seen it in January, — shouldn't he, boys?"

"Bah! the usual 'last Toosday' of 'Punch!' The hardships of campaigning indeed! *Perdrix aux choux* and cold gooseberry tart for dinner; an idyllic mess-house in a peach-garden; coffee and iced pegs to follow."

"Well, sir," cried a youngster cheerfully, "if you had favoured us in winter we would have given you stewed Tom in addition. It was an excellent cat; we all enjoyed it, except Samuel. You see it was his favourite *miaow*, so he is going to give the stuffed skin to an aged aunt, from whom he expects money, in order to show that he belongs to the Anti-Vivisection League."

"A certain faint regard for the verities is essential to a jest," began Samuel, affecting the style of his illustrious namesake.

"I wish some one would remove the mess-dictionary," interrupted the other. "The child will hurt himself with those long words some day."

"Bad for you, if they did," grinned a third. "D'ye know he actually asked me last mail-day if there were two f's in affection. *Whoo hoop!*" Closely pursued by the avenger he leapt the low balustrade, and the garden resounded to much boyish laughter, as one by one the youngsters joined the chase.

"Remarkably high spirits," yawned John Raby, "but a trifle reminiscent of a young gentleman's academy. They jar on the *dolce far niente* of the surroundings."

"We were glad enough of the spirits a few months ago," replied Philip significantly. "The *dolce far niente* of semi-starvation requires some stimulant."

"That was very nearly a *fiasco*, sending you over the Pass so late. Lucky for you the Politicals put the drag on the Military in time."

"Lucky, you mean, that poor Dick Smith managed to send that telegram. I've often wondered how he did it. The story would be worth hearing; he was one in a thousand."

"You always had a leaning towards that red-headed boy; now I thought him most offensive. He — "

"*De mortuis*," quoted the Major with a frown.

"Those are the ethics of eternity combined with a sneaking belief in ghosts. But I mean nothing personal. He was simply a disconcerting sport, as the biologists say, from the neutral-tinted Eurasian, and I distrust a man who doesn't look his parentage; he is generally a fraud or a monstrosity."

"That theory of yours is rather hard on development, isn't it?" said Philip with a smile.

"Only a stand in favour of decency and order. What right has a man to be above his generation?

It is extremely inconvenient to the rest of us. If he is successful, he disturbs our actions; if he uses us as a brick wall whereon to dash out his brains, he disturbs our feelings. To return to Dick Smith; the whole affair was foolhardy and ridiculous. If I had been Political then I should certainly have refused to allow that camping-out on the Pass; and so he would probably have been enjoying all that money, instead of dying miserably just when life became worth having."

"What money?" asked Philip Marsden hastily.

"Didn't you hear? It was in the papers last week,— haven't seen them yet perhaps? Some distant relation of his father's died in England, leaving everything to Smith senior or his direct male heirs; failing them, or their assigns, to charity. So as no one had made a will,— paupers don't generally — some dozens of wretched children will be clothed in knee-breeches or poke-bonnets till Time is no more."

In the pause which ensued Philip Marsden felt, as most of us do at times, that he would have given all he possessed to put Time's dial back a space, and to be standing once more on the northern slope of the Peirâk with Dick's hand in his. "*There's the will, Major; it doesn't make any difference, you know.*" The words came back to him clearly, and with them the mingled feeling of proud irritation and resentful self-respect which had made him set

the blue envelope aside, and advise a more worldly caution. Temper, nothing but temper, it seemed to him now. "There was a will," he said at last, in a low voice. "Dick spoke to me of one when we came over the Pass together. You see there was a chance of his getting a few rupees from old Desouza."

John Raby threw away the end of his cigarette with an exclamation. "By George, that's funny! To make a will in hopes of something from a man who died insolvent, and come in for thirty thousand pounds you knew nothing about! But where is the will? It was not among his papers, for strangely enough the people had not looted much when the Pass opened and we went over to search. Perhaps he sent it somewhere for safe custody. It would make a difference to Belle Stuart, I expect, for he — well, he was another victim."

"I think, — in fact I am almost sure," — the words came reluctantly as if the speaker was loth to face the truth, — "that he had the will with him when he died. He showed it me — and — Raby, was every search made for the body?"

His hearer shrugged his shoulders. "As much as could be done in a place like that. For myself I should have been surprised at success. Think of the drifts, the vultures and hyenas, the floods in spring. Of course it may turn up still ere summer is over, but I doubt it. What a fool the boy was to

carry the will about with him! Why didn't he give it to some one else who was less heroic?"

"He could easily have done that, for I tell you, Raby, he was worth a dozen of us who remain," said Philip bitterly, as he stood looking over the peach-blossom to the lingering snows where Dick had died. "Well, good-night. I think I shall turn in. After all there is no fool like an old fool."

The civilian followed his retreating figure with a good-natured smile. "He really was fond of that youngster," he said to himself. "The mere thought of it all has made him throw away half of the best cigar on this side the Peirâk. By Jove! I won't give him another; it is too extravagant."

The next morning Philip Marsden came over to the Political quarters, and with a remark that last night's conversation had borne in on him the necessity for leaving one's affairs in strict business order, asked John Raby to look over the rough draft of a will.

"Leave it with me," was the reply, given with the usual easy good-nature. "It appears to me too legal, the common fault of amateurs. I'll make it unimpeachable as Cæsar's wife, get one of my *bâbus* to engross it, and bring it over ready for you to fill up the names and sign this afternoon. No thanks required; that sort of thing amuses me."

He kept his promise, finding Philip writing in the

summer-house. "If you will crown one kindness by another and can wait a moment, I will ask you to witness it," said the latter. "I shall not be a moment filling it in."

"The advantage of not cutting up good money into too many pieces," replied his friend smiling.

"The disadvantage perhaps of being somewhat alone in the world. There, will you sign?"

"Two witnesses, please; but I saw Carruthers in his quarters as I came by; he will do."

John Raby, waiting to perform a kindly act somewhat to the prejudice of his own leisure, for he was very busy, amused himself during Major Marsden's temporary absence by watching a pair of doves with pink-grey plumage among the pink-grey blossom. Everything was still and silent in the garden, though outside the row of silvery poplar trees swayed and rustled in the fitful gusts of the wind. Suddenly a kite soaring above swooped slightly, the startled doves fled scattering the petals, and the wind, winning a way through the breach in the wall, blew them about like snowflakes. It caught the paper too that was lying still wet with ink, and whirled it off the table to John Raby's feet. "I hope it is not blotted," he thought carelessly, as he stooped to pick it up and replace it.

A minute after Major Marsden, coming in alone, found him, as he had left him, at the door, with

rather a contemptuous smile on his face. "Carruthers is not to be had, and I really have not the conscience to ask you to wait any longer," said the Major.

John Raby was conscious of a curious sense of relief. In after years he felt that the chance which prevented him from signing Philip Marsden's will as a witness came nearer to a special providence than any other event in his career. Yet he replied carelessly: "I wish I could, my dear fellow, but any other person will do as well. I have to see the Mukdoom at five, and I start at seven to prepare your way before you in true Political style. Can I do anything else for you?"

"Put the will into the Political post-bag for safety when I send it over," laughed Philip as they shook hands. "Good-bye. You will be a lion at Simla while we are still doing duty as sand-bags on the scientific frontier; diplomacy wins nowadays."

"Not a bit of it. In twenty years, when we have invented a gun that will shoot round a corner, the nation which hasn't forgotten the use of the bayonet will whip creation, and we shall return to the belief that the man who will face his fellow, and lick him, is the best animal."

"In the meantime, Simla for you and service for us."

"Not a bit of that, either. Why, the British

Lion has been on the war-trail for a year already. It's time now for repentance and a transformation-scene; troops recalled, *durbar* at Peshawar, the Amir harlequin to Foreign Office columbine, Skobeloff as clown playing tricks on the British public as pantaloon."

"And the nameless graves?"

"Principle, my dear fellow," replied John Raby with a shrug of his shoulders, "is our modern Moloch. We sacrifice most things to it,— on principle. By the bye, I have mislaid that original of the will somehow; possibly my boy packed it up by mistake, but if I come across it I'll return it."

"Don't bother,— burn it. 'Tis no good to any one now."

"Nor harm, either,— so good-bye, warrior!"

"Good-bye, diplomatist!"

They parted gaily, as men who are neither friends nor foes do part even when danger lies ahead.

That same evening the homeward bound post-runner carried with him over the Peirâk Major Marsden's will leaving thirty thousand pounds to Belle Stuart unconditionally. It was addressed to an eminently respectable London firm of solicitors, who, not having to deal with the chances of war, would doubtless hold it in safe custody until it was wanted. The testator, as he rode the first march on the Cabul road, felt, a little bitterly, that once more he had

done his best to stand between her and care. Yet it must be confessed that this feeling was but as the vein of gold running through the quartz, for pride and a resentful determination that no shadow of blame should be his, whatever happened, were the chief factors in his action. Nor did he in any way regard it as final. The odds on his life were even, and if he returned safe from the campaign he meant to leave no stone unturned in the search for Dick Smith's body. Then, if he failed to find the will, it would be time enough to confess he had been in the wrong.

John Raby, as he put the bulky letter in the Political bag according to promise, felt also a little bitter as he realised that Belle with thirty thousand pounds would come as near perfection in his eyes as any woman could. And then he smiled at the queer chance which had put him in possession of Major Marsden's intention; finally dismissing the subject with the cynical remark that perhaps a woman who was sufficiently fascinating to make two people leave her money ere she was out of her teens might not be a very safe possession.

CHAPTER XIII.

In the tiny drawing-room of a tiny house, wedged in between a huge retaining wall and the almost perpendicular hill-side, Belle Stuart sat idly looking out of the window. Not that there was anything to see. The monsoon fogs swept past the stunted oaks, tipped over the railings, filled the verandah, crept in through the crevices, and literally sat down on the hearth-stone; for the room was too small, the thermometer too high, and humanity too poor, to allow of a fire. Without, was a soft grey vapour deadening the world; within, was a still more depressing atmosphere of women, widow's weeds, and wrangling.

On her lap lay the newspaper filled, as usual, with items from the frontier. To many a woman that first sheet meant a daily agony of relief or despair; to Belle Stuart it was nothing more than a history of the stirring times in which she lived, for with Dick's sad end, and John Raby's return to reap rewards at Simla, she told herself that her personal interest in the war must needs be over. A passing pity, perhaps, for some one known by name, a kindly joy for some chance acquaintance, might stir her pulses;

but nothing more. Yet as she sat there she was conscious of having made a mistake. Something there was in the very paper lying on her lap which had power to give keen pain; even to bring the tears to her eyes as she read the paragraph over again listlessly.

Severe Fighting in the Terwân Pass. Gallant Charge of the 101st Sikhs. List of Officers Killed, Wounded, and Missing. — The telegram which reached Simla a few days ago reporting a severe skirmish in the Terwân has now been supplemented by details. It appears that a small force consisting of some companies of the 101st Sikhs, the 24th Goorkhas, the 207th British Infantry, and a mule battery, were sent by the old route over the Terwân Pass in order to report on its practical use. No opposition was expected, as the tribes in the vicinity had come in and were believed to be friendly. About the middle of the Pass, which proved to be far more difficult than was anticipated, a halt had to be made for the purpose of repairing a bridge which spanned an almost impassable torrent. The road, which up to this point had followed the right bank of the river, now crossed by this bridge to the left in order to avoid some precipitous cliffs. Here it became evident that the little force had fallen into an ambuscade, for firing immediately commenced from the numerous points of vantage on either side. The Goorkhas, charging up the right bank, succeeded in dislodging most of the enemy and driving them to a safe distance. From the advantage thus gained they then opened fire on the left bank, managing to disperse some of the lower pickets. Owing, however, to the rocky and almost precipitous nature of the ground the upper ones were completely protected, and continued to pour a relent-

less fire on our troops, who were, for the most part, young soldiers. During the trying inaction necessary until the bridge could be repaired, — which was done with praiseworthy rapidity despite the heavy fire — Major Philip Marsden, of the 101st Sikhs, volunteered to attempt the passage of the torrent with the object of doing for the left bank what the Goorkhas had done for the right.

Accordingly the Sikhs, led by this distinguished officer, rushed the river in grand style, how it is almost impossible to say, save by sheer pluck and determination, and after an incredibly short interval succeeded in charging up the hill-side and carrying picket after picket. A more brilliant affair could scarcely be conceived, and it is with the very deepest regret that we have to report the loss of its gallant leader. Major Marsden, who was among the first to find foothold on the opposite bank, was giving directions to his men when a bullet struck him in the chest. Staggering back almost to the edge of the river, he recovered himself against a boulder, and shouting that he was all right, bade them go on. Lost sight of in the ensuing skirmish, it is feared that he must have slipped from the place of comparative safety where they left him and fallen into the river, for his helmet and sword-belt were found afterwards a few hundred yards down the stream. None of the bodies, however, of those lost in the torrent have been recovered. Nor was it likely that they would be, as the stream here descends in a series of boiling cataracts and swirling pools. In addition to their leader, whose premature death is greatly to be deplored, the Sikhs lost two native officers, and thirty-one rank and file. The Goorkhas —

But here Belle's interest waned and she let the paper fall on her lap again. One trivial thought

became almost pitifully insistent, "I wish, oh, how I wish I had not sent back that letter unopened!" As if a foolish girlish discourtesy more or less would have made any difference in the great tragedy and triumph of the man's death. For it was a triumph; she could read that between the lines of the bald conventional report.

"There's Belle crying, actually crying over Major Marsden," broke in Maud's cross voice from a rocking-chair. Now a rocking-chair is an article of furniture which requires a palatial apartment, where its obtrusive assertion of individual comfort can be softened by distance. In the midst of a small room, and especially when surrounded by four women who have not rocking-chairs of their own, it conduces to nervous irritation on all sides. "You talk about disrespect, mamma," went on the same injured voice, "just because I didn't see why we shouldn't go to the Volunteer Ball in colours, when he was only our stepfather; but I call it really nasty of Belle to sit and whimper over a man who did his best to take away the only thing except debts that Colonel Stuart — "

"Oh, do hold your tongue, Maudie!" cried Mabel. "I'm getting sick of that old complaint. I don't see myself why we shouldn't wear our pink tulles. It would be economical to begin with, and, goodness knows, we have to think of the rupees, annas, and paisas nowadays."

Here Maud, who was not really an ill-tempered girl, became overwhelmed by the contemplation of her own wrongs, and began to sob. "I never — wore — a year-behind-fashion dress before, and — when I suggest it — just to save the expense — I'm told I'm heartless. As if it was my fault that mamma's settlement was so much waste paper, and that our money went to pay — "

"Really, Maud, you are too bad," flared up her youngest sister. "If it was any one's fault, it was Uncle Tom's, for not being more careful. The governor was awfully good to us always. Ah, things were very different then!"

This remark turned on the widow's ready tears. "Very different indeed. Three in the kitchen, and I wouldn't like to say how many in the stable. And though I don't wish to repine against Providence, yet caps are so expensive. I can't think why, for they are only muslin; but Miss Crowe says she can't supply me with one that is really respectful under five rupees."

"It is all very well for you to talk, Mabel," insisted Maud from the rocking-chair; "you have a settlement of your own in prospect."

"So might you," retorted the other, "if you were wise, instead of wasting your time over men who mean nothing, like that handsome Captain Stanley."

"Yes!" yawned Mildred. "It is the stubby

Majors with half-a-dozen motherless children growing up at home who marry."

Mabel flushed through her sallow skin and in her turn became tearful; for in truth her *fiancé* was but too accurately described in these unflattering terms. "It is not your part to jeer at me for sacrificing myself to the interests of you girls. In our unfortunate position it is our duty to avail ourselves of the chances left us, and not to go hankering after penniless probationers in the Post-Office."

Yet one more recruit for pocket-handkerchief drill rushed to the front, though more in anger than sorrow. "If you are alluding to Willie Allsop," retorted Mildred fiercely, "I dare say he will be as well off as your Major some day. At any rate I'm not going to perjure myself for money, like some people."

"Oh, girls, girls!" whimpered the widow plaintively, "don't quarrel and wake Charlie, for the doctor said he was to be kept quiet and not excited. Really, misfortunes come so fast, and things are so dear,— to say nothing of Parrish's Chemical Food for Charlie — that I don't know where to turn. If poor Dick had but lived! It was too bad of those nasty Afghans to kill the dear boy just as he was getting on, and being so generous to me. I always stood up for Dick; he had a warm heart, and people don't make their own tempers, you know."

Belle, who had been sitting silent at the window, clasping and unclasping her hands nervously, felt as if she must stifle. "I wish," she said in a low voice, "you would let me go on teaching as I did in the winter. Why should we mind, even if there are old friends here now? I am not ashamed of working."

Her remark had one good effect. It healed minor differences by the counter irritation of a general grievance, and the upshot of a combined and vigorous attack was that there had been quite enough disgrace in the family already, without Belle adding to it. Of course, had she been able to give lessons in music or singing, the suggestion might have been considered, since the flavour of art subdued the degradation; but the idea of teaching the children of the middle class to read and write was hopelessly vulgar. It was far more genteel to become a *zenana*-lady, since there the flavour of religion disguised the necessity. Belle, trying to possess her soul in patience by stitching away as if her life depended on it, found the task beyond her powers. "I think I'll go out," she said in a choked voice. "Oh, yes! I know it's raining, but the air will do me good; the house is so stuffy."

"It's the best we can afford now," retorted Maud.

"And the position is good," suggested Mrs. Stuart feebly.

"Belle doesn't care a fig for position, mamma," snapped up her daughter. "She would have liked one of those barracks by the bazaar where nobody lives."

"We might have got up a scratch dance there," remarked Mildred in tones of regret. "Oh, not *now*, mamma, of course; but by and by when things got jollier."

"I don't believe they ever will get jollier," came in gloomy prophecy from the rocking-chair, as Belle escaped gladly into the mist and rain. Six weeks, she thought; was it only six weeks since the maddening, paralysing drip, drip, drip of ceaseless raindrops had been in her ears? And yet these experienced in hill-weather spoke cheerfully of another six weeks to come. Would she ever be able to endure being the fifth woman in that ridiculous little room for all those days? What irritated her most was the needlessness of half the petty worries which went to make up the dreary discomfort. The extravagant clinging to the habits of past opulence, the wastefulness, resulting in the want of many things which might have made life more pleasant; the apathy content to grumble and do nothing, while she felt her spirits rise and her cheeks brighten even from her rapid walk through the driving mist. The rain had lessened as she paused to lean over the railings which protected a turn of the road where it

was hollowed out from the hill-side; sheer cliff on one side, sheer precipice on the other. Up to her very feet surged the vast grey sea of mist, making her feel as if one more step would set her afloat on its shoreless waste. Yet below that dim mysterious pall lay, she well knew, one of the fairest scenes on God's earth, smiling doubtless in a sunshine in which she had no part. Then suddenly, causelessly, the words recurred to her — "*The world is before you yet; it holds life, and happiness, and love.*" Who had said them? Even now it cost her an effort to remember clearly the events following on the shock of her father's death. The effort was so painful that she avoided it as a rule; but this time the memory of Philip Marsden's kindness came back sharply, and the trivial remorse about the letter rose up once more to take the front place in her regrets until driven thence by one vague, impotent desire to have the past back again. Looking down into the impalpable barrier of cloud through which a pale gleam of light drifted hither and thither, she could almost fancy herself a disembodied spirit striving after a glimpse of the world whence it had been driven by death; so far away did she feel herself from those careless days at Faizapore, from the kindly friends, the —

"Miss Stuart! surely it is Miss Stuart!" cried a man's voice behind her. She turned, to see John

Raby, who, throwing the reins of his pony to the groom, advanced to greet her, his handsome face bright with pleasure. His left arm was in a sling, for he had been slightly wounded; to the girl's eyes he had a halo of heroism and happiness round him.

"I am so glad!" she said, "so glad!"

As they stood, hand in hand, a sunbeam struggling through the cloud parted the mist at their feet. Below them, like a jewelled mosaic, lay the Doon bathed in a flood of light; each hamlet and tree, each silver torrent-streak and emerald field, seemingly within touch, so clear and pellucid was the rain-washed air between. Further away, like fire-opals with their purple shadows, flashed the peaks of the Sewaliks, and beyond them shade upon shade, light upon light, the mother-of-pearl plain losing itself in the golden setting of the sky.

"I am in for luck all round," cried John Raby in high delight. "That means a break in the rains, and a fortnight of heaven for me,— if fate is kind —"

But Belle heard nothing; one of those rare moments when individuality seems merged in a vast sympathy with all things visible and invisible was upon her, filling her, body and soul, with supreme content.

"Are you not coming in?" she asked, when, after walking slowly along the Mall, they reached the

path which led downward to the little drawing-room and the four women.

"I will come to-morrow," he replied, looking at her with undisguised admiration in his eyes. "To-day it is enough to have seen you. After all, you were always my great friend, — you and your father."

"Yes, he was very fond of you," she assented softly; and with her flushed cheeks and the little fluffy curls by her pretty ears all glistening with mist drops, showed an April face, half smiles, half tears.

CHAPTER XIV.

Two months later found Belle Raby sitting in the shade of a spreading deodar-tree, placidly knitting silk socks for her husband, who, stretched on the turf beside her, read a French novel.

Pages would not satisfactorily explain how this sequence of events came about, because pages would not suffice to get at the bottom of the amazing, unnatural ignorance of first principles which enables a nice girl to marry a man towards whom she entertains a rudimentary affection, and afterwards, with the same contented calm, to acquiesce in the disconcerting realities of life. Belle was not the first girl who chose a husband as she would have chosen a dress; that is to say, in the belief that it will prove becoming, and the hope that it will fit. Nor was she (and this is the oddest or the most tragic part in the business) the first or the last girl who, after solemnly perjuring herself before God and man to perform duties of which she knows nothing, and to have feelings of which she has not even dreamed, is on the whole perfectly content with herself and her world. In fact Belle, as she looked affectionately at her lounging spouse, felt no shadow of doubt as

to the wisdom of her choice; so little has the mind or heart to do with the crude facts of marriage, so absolutely distinct are the latter from the spiritual or sentimental love with which ethical culture has overlaid the simplicity of nature to the general confusion of all concerned.

"Upon my life, Paul de Kock is infinitely amusing!" remarked John Raby, throwing the book aside and turning lazily to his young wife. "Worth twice all your Zolas and Ohnets, who *will* be serious over frivolity. Our friend here has an inexhaustible laugh."

"I'm sure I thought him dreadfully stupid," replied Belle simply. "I tried to read some last night."

"I wouldn't struggle to acquire the art of reading Paul de Kock, my dear," said John Raby with a queer smile. "It's not an accomplishment necessary to female salvation. The most iniquitous proverb in the language is that one about sauce for the goose and the gander. Say what you will, men and women are as different in their fixings as chalk from cheese. Now I,— though I am domestic enough in all conscience — would never be contented knitting socks as you are. By the way, those will be too big for me."

"Who said they were meant for you?" retorted Belle gaily. "Not I!"

"Perhaps not with your lips; but a good wife invariably knits socks for her husband, and you, my dear Belle, were foreordained from the beginning of time to be a good wife,— the very best of little wives a man ever had."

"I hope so," she replied after a pause. "John, it is all very well here in holiday time to be lazy as I am, but by and by I should like to be a little more useful; to help you in your work, if I could; at any rate to understand it, to know what the people we govern think, and say, and do."

Her husband sat up, dangling his hands idly between his knees. "I'm not sure about the wisdom of it. Personally I have no objection; besides, I hold that no one has a right to interfere with another person's harmless fancies; yet that sort of thing is invariably misunderstood in India. First by the natives; they think a woman's interest means a desire for power. Then by the men of one's own class; they drag up 'grey mare the better horse,' &c. How I hate proverbs! You see, women out here divide themselves, as a rule, betwixt balls and babies, so the men get *cliqué*. I don't defend it, but it's very natural. Most of us come out just at the age when a contempt for woman's intellect seems to make our beards grow faster, and we have no clever mixed society to act as an antidote to our own conceit. Now a woman with a clear head like yours,

Belle, you are much cleverer than I thought you were, by the way, is sure with unbiassed eyes to see details that don't strike men who are in the game,— unpleasant, ridiculous details probably,— and that is always an offence. If you were stupid, it wouldn't matter; but being as you are, why, discretion is the better part of valour."

"But if I have brains, as you say I have, what am I to do with them?" cried Belle, knitting very fast.

"There are the balls,— and the babies; as Pendennis said to his wife, '*Tout vient à ceux qui savent attendre.*' By the way, I wonder where the dickens the postman has gone to to-day? It's too bad to keep us waiting like this. I'll report him."

"*Tout vient — !*" retorted Belle, recovering from a fine blush. "Why are you always in such a hurry for the letters, John? I never am."

"No more am I," he cried gaily, rising to his feet and holding out his hand to help her. "I never was in a hurry, except — " and here he drew her towards him in easy proprietorship — "to marry you. I was in a hurry then, I confess."

"You were indeed," said the girl, who but a year before had felt outraged by the first passionately pure kiss of a boy, as she submitted cheerfully to that of a man whose love was of the earth, earthy. "Why, you hardly left me time to get a wedding-garment! But it was much wiser for you to spend the rest of

your leave here, than to begin work and the honeymoon together."

"Much nicer and wiser; but then you are wisdom itself, Belle. Upon my soul, I never thought women could be so sensible till I married you. As your poor father said the first time we met, I have the devil's own luck."

He thought so with the utmost sincerity as he strolled along the turfy stretches beyond the deodars, with his arm round his wife's waist. The devil's own luck, and all through no management of his own. What finger had he raised to help along the chain of fatality which had linked him for life to the most charming of women who ere long would step into a fortune of thirty thousand pounds? On the contrary, had he not given the best of advice to Philip Marsden? Had he not held his tongue discreetly, or indiscreetly? Finally, what right would he have had to come to Belle Stuart and say, "By an accident, I have reason to suppose that you are somebody's heiress." For all he knew the sentimental fool might have made another will. And yet when two days later the dilatory postman brought in the English mail, John Raby's face paled, not so much with anxiety, as with speculation.

"Have you been running up bills already?" he asked, lightly, as he threw an unmistakably business envelope over to her side of the table along with some others.

"You wouldn't be responsible, at all events," she replied with a laugh, "for it is addressed to Miss Belle Stuart."

"I am not so sure about that," he retorted, still in the same jesting way. "It is astonishing how far the responsibility of a husband extends."

"And his rights," cried Belle, who in a half-hearted way professed advanced opinions on this subject.

"My dear girl, we must have some compensation."

He sat reading, or pretending to read, his own letters with phenomenal patience, while his wife glanced through a long crossed communication from her step-sisters; he even gave a perfunctory attention to several items of uninteresting family news which she retailed to him. He had foreseen the situation so long, had imagined it so often, that he felt quite at home and confident of his self-control.

"John!" came Belle's voice, with a curious catch in it.

"What is it, dear? Nothing the matter, I hope? You look startled." He had imagined it so far; but he knew the next minute from her face that he had under-rated something in her reception of the news. She had risen to her feet with a scared, frightened look. "I don't understand," she said, half to herself; "it must be a mistake." Then remembering, apparently, that she no longer stood alone, she crossed

swiftly to her husband's side, and kneeling beside him thrust the open letter before his eyes. "What does it mean, John?" she asked hurriedly. "It is a mistake, isn't it?"

His hand, passed round her caressingly, could feel her heart bounding, but his own kept its even rhythm despite the surprise he forced into his face. "It means," he said, at length,— and the ring of triumph would not be kept out of his voice — "that Philip Marsden has left you thirty thousand pounds."

"Left *me!* — impossible! I tell you it is a mistake!"

Now that the crisis was over, the cat out of the bag, John Raby knew how great his anxiety had been, by the sense of relief which found vent in a meaningless laugh. "Lawyers don't make mistakes," he replied. "It is as clear as daylight. Philip Marsden has left you thirty thousand pounds! By Jove, Belle, you are quite an heiress!"

She stood up slowly, leaning on the table as if to steady herself. "That does not follow," she said, "for of course I shall refuse to take it."

Her husband stared at her incredulously. "Refuse thirty thousand pounds,— are you mad?" He need not have been afraid of under-doing his part of surprise, for her attitude took him beyond art into untutored nature.

"It is an insult!" she continued in a higher key.

"I will write to these people and say I will not have it."

"Without consulting me? You seem to forget that you are a married woman now. Am I to have no voice in the matter?" His tone was instinct with the aggressive quiet of one determined to keep his temper. "Supposing I disapproved of your refusal?" he went on, seeing from her startled look that he had her unprepared.

"Surely you would not wish —"

"That is another question. I said, supposing I disapproved of the refusal. What then?"

Standing there in bewildered surprise, the loss of her own individuality made itself felt for the first time, and it roused the frightened resentment of a newly-caught colt. "I do not know," she replied, bravely enough. "But you would surely let me do what I thought right?"

"Right! My dear girl, do stick to the point. Of course if there were urgent reasons *against* your taking this money —"

"But there are!" interrupted Belle quickly. "To begin with, he had no right to leave it to me."

"I beg your pardon. The law gives a man the right to leave his money to any one he chooses."

"But he had no right to choose me."

"I beg your pardon again. It is not uncommon for a man to leave his money to a woman with whom he is in love."

"In love!" It was Belle's turn to stare incredulously. "Major Marsden in love with me! What put that into your head?"

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "My dear child, even if you didn't know it before,— and upon my soul you are unsophisticated enough for anything — surely it is patent now. A man doesn't leave thirty thousand to any woman he happens to know."

For the first time Belle flinched visibly and her face paled. "All the more reason for refusing, surely," she replied in a low tone, after a pause. "You could not like your wife — "

"Why not? It isn't as if you had cared for him, you know."

The blood which had left her cheeks came back with an indignant rush. "Care for him! Can't you see that makes it doubly an insult?"

"I'm afraid not. It makes it much more sentimental, and self-sacrificing, and beautiful, on his part; and I thought women admired that sort of thing. I know that leaving money to the girl who has jilted you is a stock incident in their novels."

"I did not jilt Philip Marsden. I refuse to admit the incident into my life. I don't want to vex you, John, but I must do what I think right."

Her husband, who had walked to the window and now stood looking out of it, paused a moment before

replying. "My dear Belle," he said at last, turning to her kindly, "I hate on principle to make myself disagreeable to any one, least of all to my wife, but it is best you should know the truth. The law gives that money to me, as your husband. You see, you married without settlements. Now, don't look like a tragedy-queen, dear, for it never does any good. We have to accept facts, and I had nothing to do with making the law."

"You mean that I have no power to refuse?" cried Belle with her eyes full of indignant tears.

"I'm afraid so. But there is no reason why I should stand on my rights. I should hate to have to do so, I assure you, and would far rather come to a mutual understanding. Honestly, I scarcely think the objections you have urged sufficient. Perhaps you have others; if so, I am quite willing to consider them."

The curious mixture of resentment, regret, and remorse which rose up in the girl's mind with the mere mention of Major Marsden's name, made her say hurriedly, "Think of the way he treated father! If it was only for that—" The tears came into her voice and stifled it.

John Raby looked at her gravely, walked to the window again, and paused. "I fancied that might be one, perhaps the chief reason. Supposing you were mistaken: supposing that Marsden was proved

to have done his best for your father, would it make any difference?"

"How can it be proved?"

"My dear Belle, I do wish you would stick to the point. I asked you if your chief objection would be removed by Major Marsden's having acted throughout with a regard for your father's reputation which few men would have shown?"

"I should think more kindly of him and his legacy certainly, if such a thing were possible."

"It is possible; and, as I said before, it is best in all things to have the naked, undisguised truth. I would have told you long ago if Marsden hadn't given it me in confidence. But now I feel that respect for his memory demands the removal of false impressions. Indeed, I never approved of his concealing the real facts. They would have been painful to you, of course; they must be painful now — worse luck to it; but if it hadn't been for that idiotic sentimentality of poor Marsden's you would have forgotten the trouble by this time."

Belle, with a sudden fear, the sort of immature knowledge of the end to come which springs up with the first hint of bad tidings, put out her hand entreatingly. "If there is anything to tell, please tell it me at once."

"Don't look so scared, my poor Belle. Come, sit down quietly, and I will explain it all. For it

is best you should not remain under a wrong impression, especially now, when,— when so much depends on your being reasonable."

So, seated on the sofa beside her husband, Belle Stuart listened to the real story of her father's death and Philip Marsden's generosity. "Is that all?" she asked, when the measured voice ceased. It was almost the first sign of life she had given.

"Yes, dear, that is all. And you must remember that the trouble is past and over,— that no one but we two need ever suspect the truth —"

"The truth!" Belle looked at him with eyes in which dread was still the master.

"And he was not accountable for his actions, not in any way himself at the time," he continued.

With a sudden sharp cry she turned from him to bury her face in the sofa cushions. "Not himself at the time!" Had he ever been himself? Never, never! How could a dishonoured, drunken gambler, dying by his own act, have been, even for a moment, the faultless father of her girlish dreams! And was that the only mistake she had made; or was the world nothing but a lie? Was there no truth in it at all, not even in her own feelings?

"I am so sorry to have been obliged to give you pain," said her husband, laying his hand on her shoulder. "But it is always best to have the truth."

His words seemed a hideous mockery of her

thoughts, and she shrank impatiently from his touch.

"You must not be angry with me; it is not my fault," he urged.

"Oh, I am not angry with you," she cried, with a petulant ring in her voice as she raised herself hastily, and looked him full in the face. "Only, — if you don't mind — I would so much rather be left alone. I want to think it all out by myself,— quite by myself."

The hunted look in her eyes escaped his want of sympathy, and he gave a sigh of relief at her reasonableness. "That is a wise little woman," he replied, bending down to kiss her more than once. "I'll go down the *khud* after those pheasants and won't be back till tea. So you will have the whole day to yourself. But remember, there is no hurry. The only good point about a weekly post is that it gives plenty of time to consider an answer."

That, to him, was the great point at issue; for her the foundations of the deep had suddenly been let loose, and she had forgotten the question of the legacy. Almost mechanically she gave him back his farewell kiss, and sat still as a stone till he had left the room. Then, impelled by an uncontrollable impulse, she dashed across to the door and locked it swiftly, pausing, with her hand still on the key, bewildered, frightened at her own act. What had she done? What did it mean? Why had her one

thought been to get away from John, to prevent his having part or lot in her sorrow? Slowly she unlocked the door again, with a half impulse to run after him and call him back. But instead of this she crept in a dazed sort of way to her own room and lay down on the bed to think. Of what? Of everything under the sun, it seemed to her confusion; yet always, when she became conscious of any clear thought, it had to do, not with her father or Philip Marsden, but with her own future. Was it possible that she had made other mistakes? Was it possible that she was not in love with John? Why else had she that wild desire to get rid of him? The very suggestion of such a possibility angered her beyond measure. Her life, as she had proudly claimed, was not a novel; nothing wrong or undignified, nothing extravagant or unseemly should come into it; and it was surely all this not to be in love with one's lawful husband! It was bad enough even to have had such a suspicion after a bare fortnight of wedded life; it was absurd, ridiculous, impossible. So as the day passed on, all other considerations were gradually submerged in the overwhelming necessity of proving to herself that she and John were a most devoted couple. As tea-time approached she put on a certain tea-gown which her lord and master was pleased to commend, and generally prepared to receive the Great Mogul as husbands should be re-

ceived. Not because she had come to any conclusion in regard to that locking of the door, but because, whatever else was uncertain, there could be no doubt how a husband *should* be treated. For, as some one has said, while a man tolerates the marriage-bond for the sake of a particular woman, the latter tolerates a particular man for the sake of the bond.

So Belle poured out the tea and admired the pheasants, to John Raby's great contentment; though in his innermost heart he felt a little manly contempt for the feminine want of backbone which rendered such pliability possible. Only once did she show signs of the unstilled tempest of thought which lay beneath her calm manner. It was when, later on in the evening during their nightly game of *écarté*, he complimented her on some *coup*, remarking that her skill seemed inherited. Then she started as if the cards she was handling had stung her, and her face flushed crimson with mingled pain and resentment; yet in her homeless life she had necessarily learned betimes the give and take required in most human intercourse. The fact was that already (though she knew it not) her husband was on his trial, and she could no longer treat his lightest word or look with the reasonable allowances she would have accorded to a stranger. A man is seldom foolish enough to expect perfection in a wife; a woman from her babyhood is taught to find it in her hus-

band, and brought up to believe that the deadliest sin a good woman can commit is to see a spot in her sun. She may be a faithful wife, a kindly companion, a veritable helpmate; but if the partner of her joys and sorrows is not, for her, the incarnation of all manly virtues, or at least the man she would have chosen out of all the world, her marriage must be deemed a failure. Love, that mysterious young juggler, is not there to change duty into something which we are told is better than duty, and so the simple, single-hearted performance of a simple, perfectly natural contract becomes degradation.

Belle, confused yet resentful, lay awake long after her husband slept the sleep of the selfish. Her slow tears wetted her own pillow quietly, decorously, lest they might disturb the Great Mogul's slumbers. Yet she could scarcely have told why the tears came at all, for a curious numbness was at her heart. Even the thought of her dead father had already lost its power to give keen pain, and she was in a vague way shocked at the ease with which her new knowledge fitted into the old. The fact being, that now she dared to look it full in the face without reservation, the loving compassion, the almost divine pity which had been with her ever since the day when poor Dick had first opened her eyes to the feet of clay, seemed no stranger, but a familiar friend. Then Philip Marsden! Dwell as she might on her

own ingratitude, his kindness seemed too good a gift to weep over; and again she stretched out her hands into the darkness, as she had done on the night when her anger had risen hot against the man she misjudged; but this time it was to call to him with a very passion of repentance, "*Friend, I will take this gift also. In this at least you shall have your way.*"

"By George, Belle!" said John Raby next morning, when she told him that she had made up her mind to take the legacy without demur, "you are simply a pearl of women for sense. I prophesy we shall be as happy as the day is long, always."

And Belle said she hoped so too. But when he fell to talking joyously of the coming comforts of sweet reasonableness and thirty thousand pounds, in the life that was just beginning for them, her thoughts were busy with schemes for spending some at least of the legacy in building a shrine of good deeds to the memory of her friend,— surely the best friend a woman ever had. She was bound by her nature to idealise some one, and the dead man was an easier subject than the living one.

CHAPTER XV.

Murghub Ahmad, with nothing on but a waist-cloth, his high narrow forehead bedewed with the sweat which ran down his hollow cheeks like tear-drops, was fanning the flame of his own virtue with windy words in the dark outhouse which he designated the editor's room. Four square yards of court beyond constituted the printing office of the *Jehâd*, a bi-weekly paper of extreme views on every topic under the sun. For the proprietors of *The Light of Islâm* having a wholesome regard to the expense of libels, had dispensed with the young man's eloquence as being too fervid for safety. So, Heaven knows by what pinching and paring, by what starvation-point of self-denial, the boy had saved and scraped enough to buy a wretched, rotten handpress, and two used up lithographic stones. With these implements, and a heart and brain full of the fierce fire of his conquering race, he set to work with the utmost simplicity to regenerate mankind in general, and the Government of India in particular, by disseminating the smudged results of his labours on the poor old press among his fellow-subjects; for the most part, it is to be feared, free, gratis, and for

nothing. Poor old press! No wonder it creaked and groaned under Murghub Ahmad's thin straining arms; for it had grown old in the service of Government, and on the side of law and order. Generation after generation of prisoners in the district jail had found a certain grim satisfaction and amusement in producing by its help endless thousands of the forms necessary for the due capture and punishments of criminals yet to come. Reams and reams of paper had they turned out as writs of arrest, warrants for committal, charge-sheets, orders for jail discipline, or, joyful thought, memos of discharge. And now order and discipline were unknown quantities in its life. Perhaps the change was too much for its constitution; certain it is that it became daily more and more unsatisfactory in regard to the complicated Arabic words with which its present owner loved to besprinkle his text. Then the damp, overworked stones refused to dry, even under the boy's hot feverish hands; and he lost half his precious time in chasing the shifting sunlight round and round the narrow courtyard in order to set the ink. Something there was infinitely pathetic about it all; especially on the days when, with the look of a St. Sebastian in his young face, the lad could stay his hard labour for a while, and rest himself by folding the flimsy sheets within the orthodox green wrapper where a remarkably crooked crescent was depicted as

surrounded by the beams of the rising sun. False astronomy, but excellent sentiment! Then there was the addressing for the post. Most of the packets bore the inscription *bearing;* but one, chosen with care, and cunningly corrected with a deft pen, never failed to carry the requisite stamp above the quaint address: *To my respectable and respected father, Khân Mahommed Lateef Khân, in the house of the Khân of Khurtpore, Sudr Bazaar, Faizapore.* Which is much as though one should address a Prince of the Blood to Tottenham Court Road.

Then, with the precious parcels in his arms, and one copy in his bosom, he would joyfully lock the door above which "Press of the Jehâd Newspaper" was emblazoned in English, and make his way to some cheap cook-house, where, in honour of the occasion, he would purchase a farthing's worth of fried stuff to eat with his dry dough cakes. Thereafter he would repair to the steps of a mosque, or to one of the shady wells which still linger in the heart of cities in India, in order to discuss his own views and writings with a group of young men of his own age. For in that large town, with its strange undercurrents of new thoughts and aims underlying the steady stream of humanity towards the old beliefs, Murghub Ahmad was not without his audience, nor even his following. He had the sometimes fatal gift, greater than mere eloquence, of leading the

minds of his hearers blindfold by some strange charm of voice and personality; and when, as often happened, discussion took the form of harangue, the slow-gathering, stolid crowd used to wake up into muttered approbation as the familiar watchwords of their faith were presented to them in new and bewildering forms.

It was the eve of Mohurrim, the great feast and fast of orthodox and unorthodox Mahomedans; an occasion which claimed more zeal than usual from the young reformer. On the morrow the paper shrines of the dead Hussan and Hussain, which were now being prepared in many a quiet courtyard, would be borne through the streets in triumph, followed by excited crowds of the faithful. And, as sometimes happens, it was Dussarah-tide also, and the Hindus held high festival as well as the Mahomedans. A simple thing enough to Western minds, accustomed to the idea of wide thoroughfares and religious toleration; a very different affair in the tortuous byeways of a native town, and among the ancient antagonisms. It was critical at the best of times, and this year doubly, trebly so, for with the newly-granted franchise of municipal government, the richer Hindus out-numbered the Mahomedans in the committee which had power to direct the route open to each procession. So the cry of favouritism went forth, and as the gaudy paper streamers were being gummed

to the frail bamboo frames, many a dark face grew darker with determination to carry the sacred symbol where he chose; yea, even into the midst of the cursed idol-worshipping crew, despite all the municipal committees and fat, bribing usurers in the world.

The *Jehâd* was full of sublime wrath and valiant appeals for justice to high Heaven, because a certain connecting alley between two of the big bazaars had been closed to the Mahomedans and given to the Hindus. True, another, and equally convenient, connection, had been allowed the former; but for many years past the procession of *tâzzias* had struggled through that particular alley, and the innovation was resented as an insult. East and west, mankind is made the same way. It was astonishing how many imperious demands on the resources of Providence this trivial change aroused in Murghub Ahmad. He called for justice, mercy, and religious freedom, for the stars as witness, for the days of Akbar. On the other hand, a rival print with an unpronounceable title, clamoured for Bikramâjeet, the hero-king of old, for Hindu independence and the sword. Either faction, it may be observed, asked for those things in others of which they had least themselves, after the way of factions all over the world.

Thus many a quarterstaff was being diligently whittled that evening, and down in the butchers'

quarter even deadlier weapons were being talked of openly by its inhabitants, the most truculent of all the mixed races and trades with which rulers have to deal. John Raby, doing his judicial work in the big court-house outside the town, felt, with that sharp, half-cunning perception of concealed things which he possessed so pre-eminently, that there was mischief brewing, and drove round by the executive official's house in order to tell him so. The latter assured him that the newly-elected municipal committee were fully alive to the necessity for precautions; whereat the young man shrugged his shoulders and said he was glad to hear it. He mentioned it casually to Belle with a sneer, which he did not allow himself in public, at the crass stupidity of needlessly setting race against race by premature haste to confer the blessings of vestrydom on India. And Belle agreed, since, even with the limited experience of the past year, she had learnt a sort of reverence for the old ways, which seem so irredeemably bad to the unsympathetic philanthropy of the West.

For a whole year had passed since the fateful letter announcing the legacy had come to disturb the foundations of her world. It had had surprisingly little effect on her, chiefly because she was determined that her life must run in one ordered groove. There must be no mistake or fiasco, nothing but

what she considered decent, orderly, virtuous. Uninteresting, no doubt; but it is nevertheless true that a very large number of women are born into the world with an unhesitating preference for behaving nicely; women who can no more help being long-suffering, cheerful, and self-forgetful, than they can help being the children of their parents. Her husband's clear sight had early seen the expediency of concealing from her the radical difference between her view of life and his own. He even felt pleased she should think as she did; it was so much safer, and more ladylike. In his way he grew to be very fond of her, and there was scarcely any friction between them, since, moved by a certain gratitude for the change her money had wrought in his prospects, he gave her free play in everything that did not interfere with his settled plans. Half the said money was already invested in Shunker Dâs's indigo concern, and John Raby was only awaiting its assured success to throw up his appointment and go openly into trade; but of this Belle knew nothing. She had money enough and to spare for all her wishes, and that was sufficient for her; indeed, on the whole, she was happy in the larger interests of her new life. The tragic, poverty-stricken, yet contented lives of the poor around her had a strange fascination for the girl, and the desire to see and understand all that went to make up the pitiful sum-

total of their pleasures, led her often, on her solitary morning rides (for John was an incurable sluggard) through the alleys and bazaars of the great city. In the latter, the people knowing in a dim way that she was the judge *sahib's* wife, would *salaam* artificially, but in the back streets both women and children smile on her, much to her unreasoning content.

So the morning after her husband's sarcasm over the mistakes of his seniors, she determined, in the confidence of ignorance, to see something of the processions; and with this intention found herself, about seven o'clock, in the outskirts of the town. Here the deserted appearance of the streets beguiled her into pushing on and on, until close to the big mosque a blare of conches, and the throbbing of ceaseless drums mingled with cries, warned her of an advancing procession. Wishing to watch it unobserved, she turned her horse into a side alley and waited.

As in all countries, a rabble of boys, sprung Heaven knows whence, formed the advance guard. Behind them came an older, yet more mischievous crowd of men flourishing quarterstaves and shouting "Hussan! Hussain!" Next emerged into the square, a swaying, top-heavy *tazzia*, looking every instant as though it must shake to pieces, and behind it more quarterstaves and more *tazzias*, more shouts, and more dark faces streaming on and on to overflow

into the square, until the procession formed a part only of the great crowd. So absorbed was she in watching the swooping out of each successive *tazzia*, like some gay-plumaged bird from the intricate windings of the way beyond, that she failed to notice the current settling towards her until the vanguard of urchins was almost at her horse's hoofs. Then she recognised the disconcerting fact that she had taken refuge in the very path of the procession. Turning to escape by retreat, she saw the further end of the alley blocked by a similar crowd; only that here the shouts of "*Dhurm! Dhurm! Durga dei! Gunga* (the faith, the faith! the goddess Durga! Ganges!)" told of Hindu fanaticism.

She was, in fact, in the very alley which both sides claimed as their own. Bewildered, yet not alarmed, for her ignorance of religious ecstasy made her presuppose deference, she turned her horse once more, and rode towards the advancing *tazzias* at a foot's-pace. The look of the crowd as she neared it was startling, but the cry of "*Jehâd! Jehâd!* Death to the infidel!" seemed too incredible for fear; and ere the latter came with the conviction that not even for a judge *sahib's mem* would the stream slacken, a young man, his gaunt face encircled by a high green turban, rushed to the front and seized her horse by the bridle.

"No words! Dismount yourself from steed and

follow your preserver. We war not with women." The effect of these stilted words uttered in tones of intense excitement was somehow ludicrous. "Smile not! Be nimble, I entreat. Unhorse yourself, and follow, follow me."

The vision of a hideous leering face leading the quarterstaves decided her on complying. The next instant she felt herself thrust into a dark entry, and ere the door closed, heard a scream of terrified rage from her horse, as some one cut it over the flank with his staff. The outrage made her temper leap up fiercely, and she felt inclined to confront the offender; but before she could reach the door it was shut and hasped in her face.

Then the desire to escape from darkness and see — see something, no matter what — possessed her, and she groped round for some means of exit. Ah! a flight of steep steps, black as pitch, narrow, broken; she climbed up, and up, till a grating in the wall shed a glimmer of light on the winding stair; up further, till she emerged on a balcony overlooking the street, whence she could see far into the alley on one side and into the square on the other. Beneath her feet lay a small empty space edged by the opposing factions hurrying into collision.

"Give way! Give way, idolaters! Hussan! Hussain! *Futeh Mahommed* (Victory of Mahomed)," yelled the *tazzia*-bearers.

"*Jai, Jai, Durga Devi, de-jai!* Give way, killers of kine," shouted the Hindus.

For an instant or two Belle's horse, hemmed in by the advancing crowds, kept the peace by clearing a space between them with head and heels; then, choosing the least alarming procession, it charged the Hindus, breaking their ranks as, maddened by terror it plunged and bit. Only for a moment, however, for the packed mass of humanity closing in round it, held it harmless as in a vice.

"The charger of Pertâp!"[1] cried a huge rice-husker with ready wit, as he leapt to the saddle, and coming rather to grief over the crutches, raised a roar of derision from the other side. He scowled dangerously. "Come on, brothers!" he cried, digging his heels viciously into the trembling, snorting beast. "Down with the cursed slayers of kine. This is Durga-ji's road,— *Dhurm! Dhurm!*"

"Hussan,— Hussain!"

Then the dull thud of heavy blows seemed to dominate the war of words, and business began in earnest as a Mahomedan, caught behind the ear, fell in his tracks. It was not much of a fight as yet, for in that narrow street the vast majority of the crowd could do nothing but press forward and thus jam activity into still smaller space, until the useless

[1] A celebrated white charger of a Rajpoot prince; an eastern Bucephalus.

sticks were thrown aside, and the combatants went at each other tooth and nail, but unarmed. So they might have fought out the wild-beast instinct of fighting, but for the fact that the Hindus, with commendable foresight, had headed their procession by athletes, the Mahomedans by enthusiast. So, inch by inch, surging and swaying, yelling, cursing, yet doing comparatively little harm, the combatants drifted towards the square until the wider outlet allowed a larger number of the Mahomedans to come into play, and thus reverse the order of affairs. Once more the *tazzias*, surrounded by their supporters, carried the lane, and swept back the red-splashed figure of Durga amidst yells of religious fury. So the battle raged more in words than blows. Belle, indeed, had begun to feel her bounding pulses steady with the recognition that, beyond a few black eyes and broken heads, no harm had been done, when a trivial incident changed the complexion of affairs in an instant.

The foremost *tazzia*, which had borne the brunt of conflict and come up smiling after many a repulse, lost balance, toppled over, and went to pieces, most likely from the inherent weakness of its architecture. The result was startling. A sudden wave of passion swept along the Mahomedan line, and as a young man sprang to the pilaster of the mosque steps and harangued the crowd, every face settled into a deadly desire for revenge.

"Kill! Kill! Kill the idolaters — *Jehâd! Jehâd!*" — the cry of religious warfare rang in an instant from lip to lip. And now from behind came a fresh burst of enthusiasm, as a body of men naked to the waist pushed their way towards the front with ominous glint of sunlight on steel as they fought fiercely for place.

"Room! Room for the butchers! Kill! Kill! Let them bleed! let them bleed!"

The shout overbore the high ringing voice of the preacher, but Belle, watching with held breath, saw him wave his hand towards the lane. Slowly, unwillingly at first, the crowd gave way; then more rapidly until a roar of assent rose up. "The butchers, the butchers! Kill! Kill!"

Belle gasped and held tight to the railing, seeing nothing more but the tide of strife beneath her very feet. Red knives, gleaming no longer, straining hands, and every now and again a gurgle and a human head disappearing to be trodden under foot. Heaven knows how weapons come in such scenes as these,— from the houses,— passed to the front by willing hands — snatched from unwilling foes who fall. In a second it was knife against knife, murder against murder. "*Durga! Durga devi!* Destroy! Destroy!" "Hussan! Hussain! Kill! Kill!" Then suddenly, a rattle of musketry at the far end of the square, where, cut off from the actual conflict

by an impenetrable crowd, a strange scene had been going on unobserved. Two or three mounted Englishmen unarmed, but sitting cool and square on their horse sat the head of a company of Mahomedan and Hindu sepoys who stood cheek by jowl, calm, apparently indifferent, their carbines still smoking from the recent discharge. About them was a curious stillness, broken only by the sound of more disciplined feet coming along at the double. A glint of red coats appears behind, and then a police-officer, the sunlight gleaming on his silver buckles, gallops along the edge of the rapidly clearing space, laying about him with the flat of his sword, while yellow-trousered constables, emerging Heaven knows from what safe shelter, dive in among the people, whacking vigorously with the traditional truncheon of the West. A rapid order to the sepoys, an instant of marking time as the company forms, then quick march through an unresisting crowd. As they near the combatants a few brickbats are thrown: there is one free fight over the preacher: and then the great mass of mankind falls once more into atoms, each animated by the instinct of self-preservation. Five minutes more, and the processions have gone on their appointed ways with the loss of some chosen spirits, while the ghastly results are being hurried away by fatigue-parties recruited from the bystanders.

"Only one round of blank cartridge," remarked John Raby, as the Deputy Commissioner rode forward ruefully to inspect the damage. "Ten minutes more, and it wouldn't have been so easy, for the fighting would have reached the square, and once a man begins — Great God! what's that?"

He was out of the saddle staring at a horse that was trying to stagger from the gutter to its feet. Perhaps in all his life he had never felt such genuine passion as then; certainly Belle herself was never so near to loving her husband as when she saw the awful fear come into his face at the sight of the riderless steed. She had been waiting for him to come nearer before calling for assistance, and now the thought of her past danger and its meaning almost choked her voice. "I'm not hurt! Oh, John! I'm not hurt," she cried, stretching her hands towards him.

He looked up to see her on the balcony, and his relief, as it often does, brought a momentary resentment. "Belle! What the devil — I mean, why are you here?"

Now that it was all over, she felt disagreeably inclined to cry; but something in his voice roused her pride and urged her to make light of what had happened, and so avoid being still more conspicuous. "I'll come down and explain," she replied with an effort.

"Wait! I'll be with you in a moment. Which is the door?" As he paused to kiss her before helping her down the dark stair, Belle passed the happiest moment of her married life. Physically and morally she felt crushed by the scenes she had witnessed, and his calm, half-callous strength seemed a refuge indeed.

"Not across the square," whispered the police-officer as he was about to take her the shortest route. "That poor brute must be shot."

John Raby raised his eyebrows a little, but took the hint. Women were kittle cattle to deal with; even the best of them like Belle. Who, for instance, would have thought of any one with a grain of sense getting into such a position? Underneath all his kindness lay a certain irritation at the whole business, which he could not conceal.

CHAPTER XVI.

Belle, recovering from the shock healthily, looked for a like forgetfulness in her husband, but she was disappointed. "There is nothing to make such a fuss about, John," she said, when a few days brought no cessation of his regret at her having been mixed up in such a scene. "It hasn't hurt me, you see; and as for the notoriety, people will soon forget all about it."

"At any rate it shows you that I was right in saying that the philanthropical dodge doesn't do in the wife of an official," he replied moodily. "A thing like that might do a man a lot of harm."

"I can't see how; besides, there isn't much philanthropy in watching men — Oh, John! don't let us talk of it any more. It makes me feel ill; I want to forget all about it."

"But you can't. I don't want to be disagreeable, Belle; but have you ever considered that there must be a trial, and that you, as an eye-witness, must — "

She turned pale, and clutched the arm of her chair nervously.

"No! I see you haven't,— that's always the way with women. They want all the fun of the fair

without the responsibility. The ring-leaders will be tried for their lives of course; eight of the poor beggars were killed, and two more are dying, so they must hang some one. You had a box-seat, so to speak, and are bound to give your evidence."

"But I could only see the tops of their heads. I couldn't possibly recognise — "

"You must have seen and heard that fool of a preacher, my dear child. That's the worst of it; if you hadn't studied the language it would have been different. As I said before, it all comes of taking what you call an interest in the people. I don't see how you are to get out of being called on for evidence, and I tell you honestly I'd have given pounds to prevent you putting yourself in such a position. It may mean more than you think."

"But I couldn't give evidence against that boy," said Belle in a very low voice. "I told you, John, I thought it was he who, — who — "

"It doesn't matter a straw if he did help you. The question is, if he excited the crowd. Of course he did, and with your predilection for abstract truth, you would say so, I suppose, even if it was, — well, unwise."

"What, — what would the punishment be?" she asked after a pause.

He looked at her with unfeigned surprise. "Really, Belle! you surely see that some one must be hanged? The question is, who?"

"But he used such long words."

He had been quarrelling with a cigarette during the conversation, and now threw it away impatiently. "You are certainly a very ingenuous person, Belle. On the whole, perhaps you *had* better stick to the truth. You couldn't manage anything else satisfactorily."

"Of course I shall stick to the truth, John," she replied hotly.

"Well, I don't want to be disagreeable, you know; but in your place I shouldn't, and that's a fact."

"Why?" she asked, in a startled voice.

"For many reasons. To begin with, the boy comes of decent folk; Marsden used to swear by the father. There were three brothers in the regiment, and one of them saved the Major's life, or something of that sort. Why, Belle, what's the matter?"

She had risen, and was now fain to catch at his outstretched hand to steady herself. Why, she scarcely knew; finding the only explanation in an assertion, made as much for her own edification as his, that her nerves must be out of order.

"Nerves!" he echoed, as he placed her with half contemptuous kindness in his chair, and brought her a scent-bottle. "I'll tell you what it is, dear, no woman should have both nerves and conscience. It's too much for one frail human being. It is no use my advising you to forget all about this wretched

business, or to suppress the disagreeable parts; and yet, in your place, I should do both."

"Oh, John!"

"Yes, I should, from a sense of duty,— to myself first, and then to society. What will be gained by hanging that blatant windbag of a boy?"

Murghub Ahmad, who, in his cell awaiting trial, was meanwhile comforting himself with the belief that the fate of nations depended on his life or death, would no doubt have resented this opinion bitterly. Yet it was all too true. The evil lay much further back than the utterance of the half-realised words which had poured from his lips like oil on the flame. He had said things as wild, as subversive of the law, dozens of times before, and nothing had happened; no one had taken any notice of it. And now! The boy buried his face in his hands, and tried to think if he was glad or sorry for martyrdom.

Mahomed Lateef, stern and indignant, hurried from far Faizapore to see his Benjamin, and in the sight of the pale half-starved face forgot his anger, and pledged his last remaining credit to engage an English lawyer for his son's defence. And then he girt his old sword about him, counted over the precious parchments of olden days, and the still more precious scraps of modern note-paper, which were all that was left to his honour, and thus armed set off to see the big Lord *sahib* at Simla. He came back look-

ing years older, to await, as they bade him, the usual course of law and order.

So it came to pass that as her husband had foretold, Belle found herself one day saying in a low voice: "I heard him call on the people to fight. I saw him wave his hand towards the Hindus."

"You mean,— pray be careful Mrs. Raby, for it is a point of great importance — that, as the butchers were coming up, you saw the prisoner wave them on to the conflict?"

"I cannot say if that was his intention. I saw him wave his hand."

"As they were passing?"

"As they were passing."

"Should you say,— I mean, did it give you the impression that he was encouraging them, urging them on?"

Belle Raby, before she answered, looked across the court at the boy, then at her husband, who with a slight frown, sat twiddling a pen at the Government Advocate's table. "It did. I think it would have given that impression to any one who saw it." And with these words every one knew the case was virtually at an end so far as Murghub Ahmad was concerned.

"Roman matrons are not in it," thought John Raby as he flung the pen from him impatiently; "and yet she will regret it all her life, and wonder

if she didn't make a mistake, or tell an untruth, to the end of her days. O Lord, I'm glad I wasn't born a woman! They won't hang him, if that's any consolation to you, my dear," he said as they drove home; "though upon my word, it isn't your fault if they don't. I'm beginning to be a bit afraid of you, Belle. Your conscientiousness would run me out of that commodity in a week; but I suppose some people are born that way."

The fresh wind blew in her face, the sun was shining, the little squirrels skipping over the road. The memory of that drive to her father's funeral returned to her, sharply, with a sort of dim consciousness that something else in her life was dying, and would have to be buried away decently ere long. "Why didn't you tell me before that he would not be hanged?" she asked in a dull voice.

"Why? For many reasons. For one, I thought you might be more merciful, and,— but there's an end of it! They'll give him fourteen years over in the Andamans. By George, the boy will learn that the tongue is a two-edged sword! Pity he wasn't taught it before."

Perhaps it was. At all events Mahomed Lateef, his father, went back to his sonless house with a vague sense of injustice not to be lost this side the grave, and a palsied shake of his head only to be stilled by death. Not to stay there long, however,

for he was ousted even from that dull refuge by the necessity for selling it in order to redeem his pledges. So he flitted drearily to his last hold on life. A scrap of land between the Indus and the sand-hills, where, if the river ran high, the flooding water raised a crop, and if not the tiller must starve, — or go elsewhere; if only to the six feet of earth all men may claim whereon to sow the seed for a glorious resurrection.

About a month after the trial John Raby came home from office, not exactly in a bad temper, but in that cynical, contemptuously-patient frame of mind which Belle began to see meant mischief to the hero-worship she still insisted on yielding to her husband.

"I've brought you something to read," he said coolly, laying a newspaper on the table and taking up the cup of tea she had poured out for him. "As that unfortunate trial has led to this premature disclosure, I think it only fair to ask you what you would rather I did in the matter. Honestly, I don't much care. Of course I would rather have had a little more time; but as the native papers have got hold of the business I'm quite ready, if you prefer it, to throw up my appointment to-morrow. However, read it,— on the second page I think — and skip the adjectives."

"Well?" he asked, as after a time she laid down

the newspaper, and stared at him in a bewildered sort of way. "The main facts are true, if that is what you mean. I was lucky enough to hit on that indigo business; it will pay cent per cent if properly worked."

"I thought," she replied in a toneless voice, "that it was against,— the rules."

"Exactly so; but you see I haven't the slightest intention of remaining in the service. I never had, if once I got an opportunity, and I've got it."

"But the rules?"

"Bother the rules! I am not going to buy a pig in a poke to please propriety. That part of it is done, and I think it is always best to let by-gones be by-gones. If you like me to send in my papers to-day, I'll do it; if not I shall hang on for a time, and defy them. Why should one lose twelve hundred a month for an idea? I do my work quite as well as I did, and there won't be any necessity for personal supervision down in Saudaghur till next spring. But as I said before, if you have scruples, — why, you brought the money, and I'm deeply grateful, I assure you. Don't look scared, my dear; I'll insure my life if you are thinking of the pension of a civilian's widow!"

"Dont' laugh, John; I can't stand it. Have any more of the native papers been writing,— things like that?" And she shivered a little as she spoke.

"No, that's the first; but the others will follow suit. They were desperately indignant about the Mohurrim riot. That is why I wanted — "

Belle stood up, and stretched her hands out appealingly to her husband, "Don't say it. Oh, please don't say it! You don't,— you can't mean it!"

He came across to her, taking her hands in his. "That's not consistent, Belle; you're always for having the truth. I do mean it. What harm would you have done to anybody by toning down what you saw? For the matter of that, what harm have I done to any one by investing money in indigo? None, absolutely none! However, it is no use talking about it; we should never agree; people seldom do on these points. But you ought to know by this time that I never mean to hurt your feelings in any way. So which is it to be,— dignity or impudence?"

And Belle, as he kissed her, felt helpless. It was like being smothered in a feather bed, all softness and suffocation.

"Well, I'm waiting. Am I not a model husband? Now don't begin to cry when it's all over; perhaps it is best as it is, for I shall have to build you a house, Belle. Think of that; a house of your very own! And look here! you can go in for doing good to your heart's content when you are no longer the wife of an official. Cheer up! There's a good time

coming, and you have to decide if it's to come now, or next spring."

"How can you ask?" she said, breaking from him hurriedly, to walk up and down the room, twisting her fingers nervously. "We must go,—go at once."

"Very well. It's a little hasty; but remember it's your doing, not mine; and for goodness' sake, you poor, little, conscience-stricken soul, don't cry at getting your own way."

CHAPTER XVII.

JOHN RABY'S announcement that he was about to leave the service fell like a thunderbolt on his old friend Shunker Dâs, for that astute gentleman had sketched out a very different programme in which the *shaitan sahib* was to figure as chief actor. Indeed, when the latter had first come nibbling round the indigo prize, Shunker had, as it were, asked him to dine off it, chuckling in his sleeve the while at the idea of getting his enemy into the toils. But then he knew nothing of the thirty thousand pounds, which the young civilian rightly considered a sufficient insurance against any punishment for breaking the rules of his covenant. So all the Lâlâ's deft hounding of the native papers on the track of "disgraceful corruption and disregard of law on the part of Mr. John Raby of the Civil Service" had simply resulted in bringing a personal supervision, destructive of account-cooking, into the business.

He went down to Saudaghur shortly after the Rabys, and nearly had a fit over the calm decision with which the young Englishman took possession of the field. New machines were being imported, new vats built, new contracts made with growers

throughout a large stretch of the district. On all sides Shunker found himself forestalled, outpaced, left in the cold. He would dearly have liked to break absolutely with this shrewd, unmerciful partner; yet to indulge this desire meant loss, for the Lâlâ, despite his hatred of the work, was not blind to John Raby's supreme capability for making the business pay. He was torn asunder by rage at having been outwitted, and admiration for the wit which had effected the task. He came home one day to the square block of a house he owned on the outskirts of Saudaghur village, cursing freely, and longing for some covert means of relieving his spite. The recipient of his curses took them with stolid indifference. She was a dark-browed, deep-chested lump of a woman, engaged in cooking the Lâlâ's dinner in a dutiful, conscientious sort of way, while she kept one eye on a solid two-year-old boy who was busy over a pumpkin rind. This was Kirpo, the absent Râm Lâl's wife, who had been sent to occupy this empty house of the Lâlâ's for several reasons. Chiefly because it was out of the way of scandal, and it had pleased Shunker to combine pleasure with the business of supporting her during her husband's imprisonment; wherefore, is one of those problems of human perversity best left alone. Kirpo herself had merely adopted the surest way of securing comfort and a pair of gold bangles, during

this unpleasing interlude, and in her heart was longing to return to her rightful owner; but not without the bangles. There was, however, considerable divergence of opinion between her and the Lâlâ on this point, resulting, on the one side, in her refusal to retire discreetly before the off chance of any remission of her husband's sentence which might induce a premature appearance; and, on the other, in Shunker's half alarmed desire to let her risk her nose by discovery. Neither of them being altogether in earnest, and each anxiously awaiting symptoms of capitulation in the other.

"I don't care for your words, Lâlâ-*ji*," she retorted in answer to his abuse. "We women have to eat curses, aye! and blows too; but we get our own way for all that. I mean to have the bangles, so the sooner you unstomach them the better." Her black brows met in determination as Shunker consigned her and all her female ancestors to unspeakable torments. "If you say much more I'll have the evil eye cast on that sickly Nuttu of yours. Mai-Bishen does it. You take seven hairs — "

"Be silent, she-devil!" shouted the Lâlâ turning green. "What ails you to give the mind freedom on such things? Lo! I have been good to you, Kirpo, and the boy there, — would mine were like him!"

Kirpo caught the child in her arms, covering him

with kisses as she held him to her broad brown breast. "Thine! Pooh! thou art a poor body and a poor spirit, Shunker. Afraid for all thy big belly; afraid of Raby-*sahib!* Look you, I will go to him; nay, I will go to his *mem*, who loves to see the black women, and she will make you give me the bangles."

Now Shunker's evil disposition partook of the nature of an amœba. That is to say, no sooner did a suggestion of food dawn upon it, than straightway the undefined mass of spite shot out a new limb in that direction. Kirpo's words had this effect upon him. After all why should she not go to see the *mem?* How angry the *shaitan* would be if he knew that his, Shunker's mistress, had had an interview with the stuck-up English girl. What business, too, had she to bring her husband money when her father was bankrupt? Rare sport indeed to chuckle over when Raby put on his airs. "By the holy water of Gunga!" he cried, "thou shalt go, Kirpo, as my wife. No one will know. Silks and satins, Kirpo, and sheets held up for thee to scuttle through so that none may see! Aha! And I have to take off my shoes at the door, curse him!" He lay back and chuckled at the bare idea of the petty, concealed insult of which no one but himself would know.

Kirpo looked at him in contemptuous dislike. "If I was a bad woman like thy friends in the bazaar I would not go, for they say she is easy to deceive

and kind; but I am not bad. It is you who are bad. So I will go; but with the bangles, and with the boy too, in a *khim-khâb* (cloth of gold) coat. 'Twill be as thy son. Lâlâ-*ji*, remember, so thou wouldst not have him look a beggar."

Her shrill laughter rang through the empty house, making an old woman glance upwards from the lower court. "Kirpo should go home," muttered the hag, "or she will lose her nose like Dhundei when they let her husband out of gaol by mistake. A grand mistake for poor Dhunnu! oho! oho!"

"Kirpo Devi," returned the Lâlâ, with a grin of concentrated wickedness. "Thou shalt have the bangles, and then thou shall go see the *mem* first, and to damnation after. Mark my words, 'tis a true saying." For another suggestion of evil had sprung into vision, and he already had a feeler out to seize it.

Two days later he sat on the same bed grinning over his own cleverness, yet for all that disconcerted. Kirpo had fled, with her boy and her bangles. That he had expected, but he was hardly prepared to find a clean sweep of all his brass cooking-pots into the bargain. He cursed a little, but on the whole felt satisfied, since his spite against Belle Raby had been gratified and Kirpo got rid of, at the price of a pair of deftly lacquered brass bangles. He grinned still more wickedly at the thought of the latter's face when she found out the trick.

As he sat smoking his pipe a man looked in at the door. A curiously evasive, downcast figure in garments so rumpled as to suggest having been tied up in tight bundles for months; as indeed they had been, duly ticketed and put away in the store-rooms of the gaol.

"Holy Krishna!" muttered the Lâlâ, while drops of sweat at the thought of the narrow escape oozed to his forehead, "'tis Râmu himself."

And Râmu it was, scowling and suspicious. "Where's my house?" he asked after the curtest of greetings.

Unfortunately for the truth Shunker Dâs had answered this question in anticipation many times. So he was quite prepared. "Thy house, oh Râmu? If she be not at home, God knoweth whither she hath gone. I sent her here, for safety, seeing that women are uncertain even when ill-looking; but she hath left this security without my consent."

His hearer's face darkened still more deeply as he looked about him in a dissatisfied way. "I went straight to Faizapore; they said she was here." He did not add that he had purposely refrained from announcing his remission (for good conduct) in order to see the state of affairs for himself.

Shunker meanwhile was mentally offering a cheap but showy oblation to his pet deity for having suggested the abstraction of the brass pots to Kirpo. "I

say nothing, Râmu," he replied unctuously; "but this I know, that having placed her here virtuously with an old mother, who is even now engaged in work below, she hath fled, nor stayed her hand from taking things that are not hers. See, I am here without food even, driven to eat it from the bazaar, by reason of her wickedness; but I will call, and the old mother will fetch some; thou must be hungry. Hadst thou sent word, Râmu, the faithful servant should have had a feast from the faithful master."

Râmu and he looked at each other steadily for a moment, like two dogs uncertain whether to growl or to be friends.

"Fret not because of one woman, Râmu," added his master peacefully. "Hadst thou sent word, she would have been at home doubtless. She is no worse than others."

"She shall be worse by a nose," retorted his hearer viciously. Whereat the Lâlâ laughed.

He sat talking to his old henchman till late on into the night, during the course of his conversation following so many trails of that serpent, his own evil imaginings, that before Râmu, full of fresh meats and wines, had fallen asleep, Shunker Dâs had almost persuaded himself, as well as the husband, that Kirpo's disappearance had something to do with gold bangles and a series of visits to the *shaitan sahib* in the rest-house, where, until their own was finished, the Rabys were living.

This scandalous suggestion found, to Râmu's mind, a certain corroboration next day; for on his way to the station in order to return to Faizapore, he came full tilt on his wife, also hurrying to catch the train. The gold bangles on her wrists, and the fact of her having remained in Saudaghur after leaving the Lâlâ's house, pointed to mischief. He flew at her like a mad dog, too angry even to listen. Now the station of Saudaghur was a good two miles from the town, and the road a lonely one; so that the enraged husband had no interruptions, and finally marched on to his destination, leaving his wife, half dead, behind a bush; a brutal, but not uncommon occurrence in a land where animal jealousy is the only cause of women's importance. That evening John Raby, riding back from a distant village in the dusk, was nearly thrown at the rest-house gates by a sudden swerve of his horse.

"*Dohai! Dohai! Dohai!*" The traditional appeal for justice rose to high heaven as a female figure started from the shadow, and clutched his bridle. It was Kirpo, with a bloody veil drawn close about her face.

The young man swore, not unnaturally. "Well, what's the matter?" he cried angrily; past experience teaching him the hopelessness of escaping without some show of attention. "I'm not a magistrate any longer, thank God! Go to the police, my good

woman. Oh!" he continued, in contemptuous comprehension, as the woman, clutching fiercely with both hands, let go her veil, which falling aside, showed a noseless face; "'tis your own fault, no doubt."

"The Lâlâ! the Lâlâ!" shrieked Kirpo. "'Tis his doing."

"Shunker Dâs?" asked John Raby, reining up his horse in sudden interest.

"Yes, Shunker Dâs! He gave me the gold bangles for going to see your *mem* and pretending to be his wife. He did it. The ill-begotten son of a hag, the vile offspring of a she-devil!"

So, with sobs and curses, she poured the whole tale of her wrong into the young man's ear. He listened to it with wonderful patience. "All you want, I suppose, is to punish your husband?" he asked, when she paused for breath.

"No!" almost yelled the woman. "The Lâlâ! the Lâlâ! I could choke him on his own flesh."

John Raby laughed. These half savages had certainly most expressive methods of speech, a pity their actions were not as forcible. "Wait here," he said quietly. "Ill send you out a note for the native magistrate; but mind! no word of your visit to my wife. I'm not going to have that all over the place."

Kirpo squatted down at the gate-post, wrapping the bloody veil round her once more; a habit she

would have to grow into with the years. Not a stone's throw from this ghastly figure, in the large bare sitting-room of the rest-house, which she had decorated to the best of her ability with Indian draperies disposed after the fashion of the West, sat Belle in a low wicker chair. A tea-table bright with silver and china awaited the master's return, while a pile of music scattered on the open piano showed her recent occupation. "There you are at last, John!" she said. "Cold isn't it? — quite Christmas weather; but your tea is ready."

"And what has my wife been doing with herself all day?" he asked, with the complacent affection which invariably sprang up at the sight of his own home comfort.

"Oh, I? Working, and reading, and practising as usual. There's a very interesting article on the morality of the Vedas in the *Nineteenth Century*. It seems wonderfully pure."

"A little more sugar, if you please, and one of those cakes with the chocolate, dear," was the reply, given with a stretching of the limbs into the curves of a cushioned chair. "Do you know, Belle, India is a most delightful country. If Blanche Amory had lived here she would not have had to say, '*Il me faut des émotions.*' They sit at the gate, so to speak, and the contrasts give such a zest to life. You, with that white gown and all the accessories (as the

studio-slang has it) are like *pâté de foie* after the black bread of the Spartans. If you have done your tea, go to the piano, there's a dear girl, and play me a valse; *Rêves d'Amour* for choice; that will put the truffles to the *pâté*."

Kirpo squatting at the gate, waiting for vengeance, heard the gay notes. "What a noise!" she said to herself; "no beginning or end, just like a jackal's cry. I wish he would send the letter."

It came at last; and Kirpo, for one, always believed that to it she owed the fact that Râmu was caught, tried, sentenced, and imprisoned for a whole year; for as she used to say, in telling the tale to her cronies, "I hadn't a cowrie or an ornament left, so it would have been no use complaining to the police."

The Lâlâ, too, impressed a like belief on the indignant Râmu. "'Tis true enough," he said, "that it is tyranny to deny a man his right to teach his wife caution; but there! — she went straight to Raby *sahib*, and now you are in for a whole year without a friend to stand treat, my poor Râmu."

Râm Lâl's teeth chattered at the prospect of desertion. "But you will stand by me still, master?" he asked piteously.

"Wherefore, Râmu? Even a *buniah* leaves old scores alone when there is a receipt-stamp on the paper," chuckled the usurer. "Pray that thou hast

not the same warder, oh my son! and come back to me, if thou wilst, when the time is over." He happened to be in high good spirits that morning owing to a slip on John Raby's part in regard to the signing of some contract which promised to put rupees into the Lâlâ's private pocket. So much so, that he went to the rest-house in order to gloat over the prospect in his unconscious partner's presence. It was the first time that the latter had seen him since Kirpo's appeal and confession, for John Raby had purposely avoided an interview until the trial, with its possibility of unpleasantness, was over. Now he calmly shut the door, and made the practical joker acquire a thorough and yet superficial knowledge of the ways of the ruling race, finishing up by a contemptuous recommendation to vinegar and brown paper.

"I've been fighting your battles, dear," he said, coming into his wife's room, and leaning over to kiss her as she lay resting on the sofa. A pile of dainty lace and muslin things on the table beside her, told tales for the future.

"My battles, John? I didn't know I had any enemies here." Or any friends she might have added, for those three months in the rest-house had been inexpressibly lonely; her husband away all day, and no white face within fifty miles.

"Enemies? No, Belle, I should say not; but I

have, and what's mine's yours, you know." Then, half amused, half irritated, he told her of Kirpo's visit.

Her eyes sought his with the puzzled look which life was beginning to put into them. "I suppose it was intended as an insult," she said; "but when a man has half a dozen wives, some married one, some another way, it,— it doesn't seem to matter if they are married or not."

"My dear!" cried he, aghast. "I do hope you haven't been reading my French novels."

She smiled, a trifle bitterly. "No; they bore me. It's the gazeteer of this district which is to blame. How many kinds of marriage? I forget; one is called a kicking-strap, I know. It is a mere question of names all through. What difference can it make?"

John Raby walked up and down the room in, for him, quite a disturbed manner. "I'm sorry to hear you speak that way, Belle. It's always a mistake. If you can't see the insult, you will at least allow that it confirms what I have always maintained, the undesirability of mixing yourself up with a social life that doesn't fit in with ours. It has put me into rather a hole at all events."

"A hole, John? What do you mean?"

"Why, even the Lâlâ won't work with me after this, and I must take all the risk; there isn't much

of course; but somehow I've been hustled all through. First by that foolish trial — "

"I thought we had agreed to leave that alone, John?" interrrupted his wife with a heightened colour.

"True, O queen! And you needn't be afraid, Belle. You and the babies shall be millionaires, billionaires if you like." And a speech like this, accompanied as it was by the half-careless, half-affectionate glance she knew so well, would start her self-reproach on the road to that sanctuary from all her vague puzzles; the fixed belief that she and John were the most attached of couples.

It would, nevertheless, be almost impossible to over-colour the absolute loneliness of the girl's life at this time. Her husband away from dawn till sundown, her only companions a people whose uncouth *patois* she hardly understood, whose broad simplicity of purpose and passion positively confused her own complexity. It was utter isolation, combined with the persistent reflection that close by in the native town, humanity went to and fro full to the brim with the same emotions of joy and sorrow, hope and fear, though the causes were different. It made her feel as if she had dropped from another world; and being, from physical causes, fanciful, she often thought, when looking over the wide level plain, without one tree to break its contour, which

stretched away from her to the horizon, that, but for the force of gravity, she could walk over its visible curve into space. One of her chief amusements was what her husband laughingly called her *jardin d'acclimatisation;* a dreary row of pots where, in defiance of a daily efflorescence of Glaubers salt, she coaxed a doxen or so of disheartened pansies into producing feeble flowers half the size of a wild heart's-ease. She was extremely patient, was Belle Raby, and given to watering and tending all things which she fancied should adorn a woman's house and home; and among them gratitude. Scarcely a day passed but the thought of Philip Marsden's ill-requited kindness set this irreclaimable hero-worshipper into metaphorically besprinkling his grave with her tears, until countless flowers of fact and fancy grew up to weave a crown for his memory, a frame for his virtues. The extent to which she idealised him never came home to her, for the fact of his having passed finally from life prevented her from having to decide his exact position in her Pantheon. Another thing which intensified her inclination to over-estimate the benefits she had received at Philip's hands was her husband's evident desire for complete silence on this subject. Naturally in one so impulsively generous as Belle, this seemed to make her remembrance, and her gratitude, all the more necessary.

So time passed until, as women have to do, she began to set her house in order against life or death. To-day, to-morrow, the next day, everything familiar, commonplace,—and then? How the heart beats in swift wonder and impatience even though the cradle may be the grave!

A hint of spring was in the air; that sudden spring which in Northern India follows close on the first footsteps of the new year. Belle, with a light heart, sat sorting her husband's wardrobe, and laying aside in camphor and peppercorns, things not likely to be required; for who could tell how long it might be ere she could look after John's clothes again? As she paused to search the pockets of a coat, a building sparrow hopped across the floor to tug at a loose thread in the pile of miscellaneous garments among which she was sitting, and a bright-eyed squirrel, hanging on the open door, cast watchful glances on a skein of Berlin wool, which appeared utterly desirable for a nest. The whole world, she thought, seemed preparing for new life, working for the unknown, and she smiled at the fancy as she began methodically to fold and smooth. More carefully than usual, for this was John's political uniform, and the sight of it invariably brought her a pang of regret for the career that had been given up. Suddenly her half-caressing fingers distinguished something unusual between the linings; something

that must have slipped from the pocket, for she had to unrip a rough mend in the latter ere she could remove a sheet of thin paper folded in two, smooth, uncrushed.

The writing startled her; it was Philip Marsden's, and she sat there for a minute staring at it blankly. In after years the smell of camphor always brought her back to that moment of life; the sunlight streaming on the floor beside her, the twittering bird, the watchful squirrel.

The draft of a will,— surely *the* will — and yet! How came it in her husband's pocket, in the coat that he must have worn? Then he had known — he *must* have known about the money! Money! Yes, the one passion she had ever seen on his face; the one love —

The sparrow came back again and again robbing one life for another. The squirrel, emboldened at her silence, made off with its heart's desire; but still poor Belle lay in a dead faint on the floor. And there she might have remained, with the accusing paper in her hand to face her husband, had not pain, sharp compelling pain, roused her. To what? To a new life, to something beyond, yet of herself, something to defy fate and carry hope and fear from the present to the future.

A vague understanding of her own position came to her as she lay slowly gathering consciousness,

until she rose to her feet and looked round her almost fearfully. "It must not alter anything," she muttered, as the torn shreds of paper fell from her shaking hand. "It cannot,— oh, dear God! it shall not. Not now, not now; I could not bear it; not now, not now!"

All that night Belle Raby fought a strange, uncertain battle, fought hard for the old life and the new, for life or death, scarcely knowing why she did either, and caring little, thinking little, of anything save the blind instinct of fight. And with the dawn the child which was hers, but which she was never to see, gave up its feeble desire, and left nothing but a pitiful waxen image to tell of life that had been and was gone.

But Belle, fast clasping her husband's hand, was in the Land of Dreams; the land to which many things besides the dead child must belong forever.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DEATH, we are told, changes our vile bodies and minds. It is at any rate to be hoped so, if orthodox heaven is to be endurable to some of us. And when mind and body have gone nigh to death, so nigh that he has stilled us in his arms for long days and nights, when he has kissed the sight of all things mortal from our eyes, and charmed away love and dread till soul could part from flesh without one sigh; does not that sometimes send us back, as it were, to a new life, and make us feel strangers even to ourselves?

Belle Raby felt this as she came back discreetly, decently, according to her wont in all things, from the Valley of the Shadow. Everything was changed, and she herself was no longer the girl who had cried uselessly, "Not now! Ah, dear God, not now!"

When she first floated up to consciousness through the dim resounding sea which for days and nights had seemed to lull her to sleep, it had been to find herself in John's arms, while he fed her with a teaspoon, and she had drifted down again into the dark, carrying with her a faint, half-amused wonder why a man who had so deceived his wife should trouble

himself about her beef-tea. Neither was it a fit season for tragedy when, with hair decently brushed for the first time, and a bit of pink ribbon disposed somewhere to give colour to the pale face, she lay propped up on the pillow at last, fingering a bunch of roses brought her by the traitor. Nor when he had carried her to the sofa with pleasant smiles at the ease of the task, could she begin the dreadful accusation, "You knew I was an heiress,— that was why you married me." Horrible, hateful! The blood would surge over her face, the tears come into her eyes at the thought of the degradation of such a mutual understanding. Better, far better, that the offender should go scot-free. And after all, where was the difference? What had she lost? Only ignorance; the thing itself had always been the same. And yet she had not found it out — yet she had been content! That was the saddest, strangest part of all, and in her first bitterness of spirit she asked herself, more than once, if she had any right to truth, when lies satisfied her so easily. He had not chosen her out of all the world because he loved her, and yet she had not found him out. Was it not possible that she had not found herself out either? And what then? Did it make any difference, any difference at all?

During her tedious convalescence she lay turning these things over and over in her mind, almost as if

the problem referred to the life of some one else. It was a critical time for the new venture, and long before she could leave the sofa, her husband had to spend a day here, two days there, arranging for labour and machinery; above all for the new house into which he was so anxious for her to settle comfortably before the hot weather came on. All was very natural and right; nevertheless it marked the beginning of the epoch which comes about in most marriages; the time when Adam and Eve leave the garden of Eden, and face the world; the time when different dispositions naturally drift apart to different interests. Belle, still weak and unstrung, found a morbid significance in her husband's growing absorption in the business; she seemed to see the greed of gold in his handsome face as he sat descanting, over his cigarette, on the many projects of his busy brain. Yet she said no word of blame or warning, for she began to lack the courage of criticism. The fact was, she did not want to know the extent of the gulf between them; therefore she kept silence on all points which might serve as a landmark to their relative positions. Even so she came on the knowledge unawares.

"I'm glad you don't fret over the baby," he said to her one day; "but you were always sensible. The poor little thing might have got ill, you know, and it would have been a bore if you had had to go

to the hills this year, when there is so much to be done."

After that she would have died sooner than mention a grief that was always with her, despite her smiling face. Yet, when he was away, she wept unrestrained tears over a forlorn little spot in the dreary garden where they told her the lost hope lay hidden away, for ever, from her eyes. If she had only seen it once, she used to think; if she could only have shed one tear over the little face of which she used to dream! If she could only have whispered to it that she was sorry, that it was not her fault. Such grief, she told herself, was natural even in the happiest wife; it could not be construed into a complaint, or counted as a surrender to Fate. She was not going to do that, whatever happened. Never, never! That was the ruling idea to which even her own unhappiness gave place; and the cause of this fixed purpose was a curious one. Nothing more or less than a passionate desire not to defeat the purpose of Philip Marsden's legacy. He had meant kindly by her; when, she thought with the glow of ardent gratitude which his memory invariably aroused, had he not meant kindly by her and hers! And no one, least of all she herself, should turn that kindness to unkindness. Poor Belle! She was bound hand and foot to hero-worship, and life had shown her unmistakably that it was safer to

canonise the dead. She lived, it must be remembered, in a solitude hard even of explanation to those unacquainted with out-station life in India. The growing gulf between her and her husband had to be bridged over a dozen times a day by their mutual dependence on each other even for bare speech. The saying, "It takes two to make a quarrel," falls short of truth. It takes three; two to fight, and one to hold the sponge, and play umpire. After a few days of silence consequent on his frequent absences, Belle was quite ready to welcome John back with smiles; and this very readiness gave her comfort. Things could not be so far wrong after all. And so every time he went away, she set herself to miss his company with a zest that would have seemed to the spectators — had there been any — right-minded, wrong-headed, and purely pitiful. It was so even to herself, at times, when, for instance, the shadows of day lifted in the night-time, and she woke to find her pillow wet with tears, — why, she knew not. Perhaps because those who had loved her best were lying in unknown graves far away among the everlasting hills. It seemed so strange that they should have met such similar fates; their very deaths mysterious, if all too certain. In her mind they seemed indissolubly mixed up with each other, living and dying, and her thoughts were often with them. Not in sadness, in anything but sadness; rather in a deep

unreasoning content that they had loved and trusted her.

And all the while Fate was arranging a cunning blow against her hard-contested peace.

She was expecting her husband one evening when the rapid Indian twilight had begun to fill the large bare room with shadows, and as, driven by the waning light from her books, she sat down at the piano, her fingers found one theme after another on the keys. Quite carelessly they fell on the *Frühlingslied*, which three years before had wrought poor Dick's undoing. And then, suddenly, she seemed to feel the touch of his warm young lips on hers, to see the fire and worship of his eyes. Was *that* Love? she wondered, as her fingers stilled themselves to silence; or was *that* too nothing but a lie? Dear, dear old Dick! The shadows gathered into an eager protesting face, the empty room seemed full of the life that was dead for ever. Ah, if it could be so really? If those dear dead could only come back just to know how sorely the living longed for them.

A sound behind made her rise hastily. "Is that you, John? How late you are!" she said with face averted, for, dark as it was, the unbidden tears in her eyes craved concealment.

"No! it is I, Philip Marsden."

Her hand fell on the keys with a jarring clang that set the room ringing. Philip! Nervous, over-

wrought, unstrung as she was by long months of silence and repression, it seemed to her that the dead had heard her wish. How terribly afraid she was! Afraid of Philip? A swift denial in her heart made her turn slowly and strain her eyes into the shadow by the door. He was there, tall and still, for darkness dazzles like day and Philip Marsden's eyes were seeking her in vain by the sound of her voice until he saw a dim figure meeting him with outstretched hands. "Philip, oh, Philip! kindest! best! dearest!"

In the shadows their hands met, warm clinging hands; and at the touch a cry, half-fear, half-joy, dominated the still echoing discord. The next instant like a child who, frightened in the dark, sees a familiar face, she was in his arms sobbing out her relief and wonder. "Ah, Philip, it is you yourself! You are not dead! You have come back to me, my dear, my dear!"

He had entered the room cynically contemptuous over the inevitable predicament into which Fate and his impulsive actions had led him. During his long captivity he had so often faced the extreme probability of her marrying John Raby that the certainty which had met him on his arrival at Kohât two days before had brought no surprise, and but little pain. The past, he had said, was over. She had never liked him; and he? That too was over; had been over for months if, indeed, it had ever

existed. He must go down at once, of course, explain about Dick's legacy and settle what was to be done in the meantime — that was all. And now she was in his arms and everything was swept away in the flood of a great tenderness that never left him again.

"Oh, Belle! You are glad, you are glad that I have come back!"

The wonder and joy of his voice seemed to rouse her to realities; she drew away from him, and stood with one hand raised to her forehead in perplexity. "How dark it is!" she cried, petulantly. "I did not see. I cannot,— Why did you come like a thief in the night? Why did you not write? Why? — you should not have come, you should not!"

"I did write," he answered gently, the blame in her tone seeming to escape his ear. "I wrote from Kohât to tell you. The dog-cart was at the station and I thought — "

"It was for John, not for you," she interrupted almost fiercely. "It was for my husband — " She broke off into silence.

"Yes; I heard at Kohât you were married."

He could not see her face, nor she his, and once more her voice was petulant in complaint. "You startled me. No one could have seen in the dark."

"Shall I call for lights now?"

"If you please."

When he returned, followed by a servant bringing the lamp, she was standing where he had left her. Great Heavens, how she had changed! Was this little Belle Stuart with her beautiful grey eyes? This woman with the nameless look of motherhood, the nameless dignity of knowledge in her face; and yet with a terror, such as the tyranny of truth brings with it, in the tired eyes which used to be so clear of care.

"I am sorry," he began; then his thought overflowed conventional speech, making him exclaim — "Don't look so scared, for pity's sake!"

"Don't look like that!" she echoed swiftly. "That is what you said the last time I saw you: 'Don't, Belle, the whole world is before you, life and happiness and love.' It was not true, and you have only made it worse by coming back to upset everything, to take away everything."

"I am not going to take anything. The money — "

"Money, what money? I was not thinking of money. Ah, I remember now! Of course it is yours, all yours."

Then silence fell between them again; but it was a silence eloquent of explanation. So eloquent that Philip Marsden had to turn aside and look out on the red bars of the sunset before he could beat down the mad desire to take instant advantage of her self-betrayal. But he was a man who above all things claimed the

control of his own life, and the knowledge that he too had been caught unawares helped him. "It is all my fault, Mrs. Raby," he said, coming back to her, with a great deference in voice and look. "This has startled you terribly, and you have been ill, I think."

"Yes, I have been ill, very ill. The baby died, and then — oh, Philip, Philip! I thought you were dead; I did indeed."

That was the end. Every atom of chivalry the man possessed, every scrap of good in his nature responded to the pitiful appeal. "I do not wonder," he answered, and though he spoke lightly there was a new tone in his voice which always remained in it afterwards when he addressed her. "I thought I was dead myself. Come, let us sit down, and I will tell you how it all happened. Yes, I thought I was dead; at least so Afzul Khân declares — "

"Afzul Khân! That was the name of the sepoy you arrested at Faizapore."

Did she remember that? It was so long ago; long before the day he had seen her last, when he had tried to comfort her, and she had sobbed out her sorrow as to a brother, in just such another bare shadowy room as this. Ah, poor Belle, poor Belle! Had it all been a mistake from beginning to end? The only refuge from bewildering thought seemed speech, and so he plunged into it, explaining, at far

greater length than he would otherwise have done, how he came to be sitting beside her, instead of lying with whitening bones in some deep pool in the mountains. He must, he said, have become unconscious from loss of blood, and slipped into the river after he was wounded, for Afzul Khân from his place of concealment on the water's edge had seen him drifting down and dragged him to safety. They were a queer lot, the Afghans, and Afzul believed he owed the Major a life. After that it was a week ere he could be taken to decent shelter, because Afzul was also wounded; but of all this he himself knew nothing. His unconsciousness passing into delirium it was six weeks ere he awoke to find himself in a sort of cave with snow shining like sunlight beyond the opening, and Afzul cooking marmot-flesh over a smoky fire. Even after that there was a rough time what with cold and hunger, for it was an enemy's country, and the people about were at blood-feud with Afzul's clan. At last it became a toss-up for death one way or the other, seeing he was too weak to attempt escape. So he had given himself up to the tribe, trusting that to their avarice an English prisoner might be worth a ransom, while Afzul had gone east promising to return with the swallows.

Then months had passed bringing threats of death more and more constant as the promised ambassador

never returned, until towards autumn, being stronger, he managed to escape, and after running the gauntlet of danger and starvation succeeded in reaching Afzul's tribe, only to find him slowly recovering from rheumatic fever brought on by exposure and privation. The poor fellow had been at death's door, and long ere he was strong enough to act as pilot eastwards winter had set her seal on the passes. So there they had remained, fairly comfortable, until spring melted the snows. "And," he added with a smile, for Belle's face had resumed its calm, "I grew quite fat, in comparison! Yet they all took me for a ghost when I walked in to the mess-room at Kohât one evening after dinner,— just as I walked in here."

But her truthful eyes looked into his and declined the excuse. "No! I did not take you for a ghost, except for an instant. I knew it was you, and that you had come back to claim — everything."

"Then you knew wrong. I have come to claim nothing. Perhaps I have no right to claim anything; so it need make no difference — "

"It must make a difference to John," she interrupted coldly. "I was thinking of him. It is hard on him at all events."

"Hard! Of course it is hard," he answered with a sudden pain at his heart. "Yet it is not my fault. I meant no harm."

"You have done no harm as far as I know," was the still colder reply. But in her turn she rose and looked out to that low bar of red still lingering in the horizon. "It is all very unfortunate, but we shall manage,— somehow." There was a pause, then she added in quite her ordinary tone, "I don't think John can be coming to-night, so we need not wait dinner for him. They have taken your things to the end room. I see a light there."

"But I have no right — " he began, crossing to where she stood.

She turned to him with a sudden gracious smile. "Right! you have every right to everything. You have given me,— what have you not given me?"

A tall figure crouching in the verandah rose as they passed through the open French window.

"Who is that?" she asked, half startled.

"Afzul Khân. I can't take him back to the regiment, of course, but he came so far with me. He has business, he says, in Faizapore."

"Afzul Khân! Call him here, please."

It was a curious group: those two bound to each other by such a tissue of misunderstanding and mistake, and the Pathan responsible for part of those mistakes. He stood by *salaaming* stolidly; for all that taking in the scene with a quick eye.

"You have brought me back the best friend I ever had," said Belle with a ring in her voice, and all

instinctively her hand sought her companion's and found it.

"It is God's will, not mine," was the reply. Not an atom of sentiment in the words, not a scrap of sanctimoniousness; simply a statement of fact. God's will! And stowed away in the folds of his fur coat lay a long blue envelope, ominously stained with blood, and addressed in a free bold hand to Miss Belle Stuart, favoured by Major Marsden of the 101st Sikhs. That was poor Dick's will at any rate. Even in their ignorance those two looked at each other and wondered. God's will! It was strange, if true.

"We dine in the garden now, it is cooler. I shall be ready in ten minutes," said Belle.

She was waiting for him under the stars when he came out from his room, and the slender figure against its setting of barren plain and over-arching sky seemed all too slight for its surroundings.

"You must be very lonely here," he said abruptly.

Her light laugh startled him. "Not to-night at any rate! To-night is high holiday, and I only hope the *khânsâmah* will give us a good dinner. Come! you must be hungry."

Thinking over it afterwards the rest of the evening seemed like a dream to Philip Marsden. A halo of light round a table set with flowers; a man and a woman talking and laughing, the man with a

deep unreasoning content in the present preventing all thought for the future. How gay she was, how brilliant! How little need there was for words with those clear sympathetic eyes lighting up into comprehension at the first hint; and with some people it was necessary to have Johnson's dictionary on the table ready for reference! Afterwards again, as he sat in the moonlight smoking his cigar, and the cool night wind stirred the lace ruffle on the delicate white arm stretched on the lounge chair, how pleasant silence was; silence with the consciousness of comprehension. Then when her hand lay in his as they said good-night how dear her words were once more. "I want you to understand that I am glad. Why not? You thought I meant the money, but it was not that. I don't know what I meant, but it was not that. I used to cry because I couldn't thank you; and now you have come, I do not want to."

"Thank me for what?" he asked, with a catch in his voice.

But there was no answering tremble in hers. "You are not so wise as your ghost; it knew. Supposing it was better to be dead after all? That would be a pity, would it not? Good-night. John will be home to-morrow."

He stood and stared at the lamp after she had gone, as if its feeble ray would illuminate the puzzle of a woman's face and words. He did not know that

for the first time in her life Belle had turned on Fate. "I do not care," she had said, recklessly, as she walked up and down waiting for him amid the flowering oleanders. "One cannot be always thinking, thinking. He has come back and I am glad. Surely that is enough for to-night."

It was not much to claim, and yet it made the puzzle so much the harder for Philip Marsden. He sat on the edge of his bed, and swore to himself that he did not know what it all meant, that he did not even know his own feelings. To leave a girl with whom you fancied yourself in love and who apparently hated you; to die, and fall out of love, only to find when you came back to life, that she who had scorned you living had taken a fancy to your memory. Nay more, to find that something in you had survived death. What? Were the elements of a French novel born out of such materials? He had never thought over these questions, being one of those men who, from a certain physical fastidiousness, are not brought into contact with them. So he may have been said to be, in his way, quite as conventional in his morality as any woman; and the suggestion of such a situation offended him quite as much as it would have offended Belle. The pride and combativeness of the man rose up against the suggestion even while the very thought of her glad welcome thrilled him through and through. He

wished no harm to her,— God forbid! And yet if one were to believe the world — bah! what was one to believe? He was too restless to sleep, and, with the curious instinct which drives most good men to be tempted of the devil in the wilderness, he put on a pair of thick boots, turned up his trousers methodically, and set out to seek peace in a moonlight walk. Bathos, no doubt; but if the sublime borders on the ridiculous, the commonplaces of life must touch on its tragedy. It was a broad white road down which he started at a rattling pace. Before, behind, it merged into a treeless horizon and it led — God knows where! For all he knew it might be the road leading to destruction; the ready-made conventional turnpike worn by the feet of thousands following some bell-wether who had tinkled down to death when the world was young. The moon shone garishly, eclipsing the stars. It seemed a pity, seeing they were at least further from this detestable world than she,— a mere satellite dancing attendance on a half-congealed cinder, and allowing it to come between her and the light at every critical moment! A pretty conceit, but not thought; and Philip was there with the firm intention of thinking out the position. Yet again and again he found himself basking in the remembrance of Belle's welcome. How glad, how unfeignedly, innocently glad she had been, till fear crept in. Fear of what? Of the

French novel, of course. He had felt it himself; he had asked himself the same question, doubtless, as she had; and what in heaven's name was to be the answer? Must love always be handfast to something else? Or was it possible for it to exist, not in the self-denying penance of propriety and duty, but absolutely free and content in itself? Why not?

As he tramped along, stunning noises came from a neighbouring village; thrummings of tom-toms, and blares of inconceivable horns mingling in a wild, beast-like tumult. That meant a marriage in all its unglozed simplicity of purpose; a marriage, to use the jargon, unsanctified by love. But after all what had love to do with marriage? What could the most unselfish dream of humanity have to do with the most selfish, the most exacting, the most commonplace of all ties? Love, it is true, might exist side by side with marriage, but the perfection of the one was not bound up in the perfection of the other. Had not the attempt to find an unnecessary fig-leaf by uniting sentiment to passion, only ended in an apotheosis of animalism not much above that which found expression in those hideous yells and brayings? Above! nay below! for it degraded love and passion alike by false shame.

To escape the wedding party he struck away from the road, and felt relieved when he had got rid of

its hard-and-fast lines, its arrogance of knowing the way. The clumps of tall tiger-grass shot arrow-like against the velvet sky, and every now and again a faint rustle at their roots told of something watching the intruder; a brooding partridge may be, perhaps a snake with unwinking eyes. And as he walked, his thoughts seemed to lead him on, till something of the truth, something naked yet not ashamed as it had been before mankind ate of the sorrowful tree, came home to him. It could not be true, that verdict of the world. He would defy it.

Suddenly he found himself confronted by a strange barrier, blocking his way. As far as eye could reach on either side rose a wall of shadow twenty feet high, a wall dense and dark below, filmy as cobwebs where the tasselled reeds of which it was composed touched the purple of the sky. The gossamer wings of a day could pass through those feathery tops; but below, even the buffalo had to seek an oozy track here and there. He had often heard of this reed wall, which, following the old river bed, divides village from village as effectually as when the stream ran fast and deep; but its curious aptness to his thoughts startled him. Impenetrable save for those who sought the mire, or those with the wings of a dove. Which was it to be ? As he stood arrested by his own fancy a night-heron flitted past; its broad white wings whirred softly, and its plumed head, craning

forward, with blood-red eyes searching the shadows, cleft the moonlight. By some strange jugglery of fancy it reminded him of a picture by Gustave Doré, and with the remembrance of Francesca da Rimini came that of the scared look in poor Belle's face.

He turned aside impatiently beset once more by the desire for escape and struck across the plain; coming, after a time, on a footpath which he followed mechanically through the tamarisk bushes, until he emerged on an open space where a hoar frost of salt crystals glittered on rows and rows of tiny mounds. So pure, so white, that the eye might have sworn to a winter's night even while the other senses told of more than summer's heat; a deception increasing the unreality with which Philip recognised that his wandering steps had led him to a village grave-yard. A far cry from the marriage feast! He sat down on the pile of disordered bricks and stucco which marked the resting-place of the saint round whose bones the faithful had gathered, and asked himself what chance there was of standing out against the opinion of the many in life, if even in death it was always follow my leader?

A quaint place it was; no enclosure, no token of hope or grief, no symbol of faith; nothing but the dead, clean forgotten and out of mind. Ah! but Belle had not forgotten him, and if he had remained dead she would have gone on giving him the best

part of herself without reproach, without remorse. Was death then the only freedom from the body? He sat so long immersed in his own thoughts that the slow stars were wheeling to meet the dawn ere he rose, and threw out his arms cramped by long stillness. Dead, yet alive,— that was the old panacea. Was nothing else attainable? Must love be killed? Why?

A rustle in the tamarisks beyond the open made him turn sharply, and make his way towards the corner whence it proceeded. As he did so a group of men defiled from the bushes, set down the burden they carried, and, without looking round, began to dig a grave. The hour, the absence of wailing, gave Philip a momentary thought that he might be assisting at the concealment of some crime, but his knowledge of the people reassured him. Yet as he approached, all the party — save a very old man mumbling his beads — scurried into the jungle, and so he judged it wiser to stop and give the orthodox salutation. The patriarch rose in feeble haste. "Allah be praised! we thought you were the ghost already. Come back; come back!" he cried in louder quavering voice. "'Tis only a Presence, seeking sport, doubtless. Come back, and get her under earth ere dawn, or 'twill be the worse for all."

Then, as one by one his companions crept back to their task, he answered Philip's curious looks with

waggling head. "Only a wanton woman, *Huzoor*. Seven months ago meek as a dove, playing about the village with maiden-plaited hair. But when the matrons unbound it for the bridegroom, as in due course of duty, the wickedness came out. It is so with some women; a fancy that hath not bit nor bridle; a wantonness of mind when God made them to be mothers. And she would have been one — ay, a happy one — for all her fancies, had she not wept herself into a wasting and died with her unborn child. Cursed creature, bringing evil on the whole village with her whims! Quick, quick, my sons! Hide her before dawn, with the irons round her thumbs, and the nails through her feet. Then will I sow the mustard-seed in her path homewards, so that cock-crow will ever send her back to the worms ere she hath done gathering. And all for a fancy when God made women to be mothers! A wanton mind! A wanton mind!"

The broken, quavering voice went on accusingly as Philip turned away sick at heart. Here was the other side of the shield; and which was the truth?

He went home feeling he had gained very little from the wilderness.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE night which had proved so restless to Philip Marsden had been for Belle, strangely enough, one of profound repose. Never, since as a child she fell asleep with the fresh cool caress of her pillow, had she felt less inclination to be wakeful, less desire for thought. The measureless content which comes so seldom, save in a pleasant dream, held her, body and soul. To feel it was enough. Yet as she woke to the sound of her husband's early return, she woke also to a full consciousness of the change Philip's resurrection from the dead must bring into their lives. A hasty remorse at her own brief happiness made her slip on a morning-gown and go into her husband's office-room. The wonder whether he knew, or whether the post which always went to him direct while he was in camp in order to save time, had failed to find him, made her cheek pale. She scarcely knew which would be worst; to meet him crushed by the news, or to have to kill his easy content with bitter tidings.

She found him already engaged with the tea and toast which the servant had brought in on his arrival.

and her heart sank; face to face with it, anything seemed better than the task of telling.

"Hullo! Belle, little woman! is that you up so early? But it must have been deuced startling for you to have Marsden walking in like Lazarus — "

"Then you have heard?" she interrupted with quite a sigh of relief.

"Of course I've heard. One always does hear that sort of thing. But the fool of a *peon*[1] took the letters to the village I'd just left, so it was too late to send you word. And then I had to finish some work. It's a queer go, isn't it? Poor old Marsden! Somehow it makes me laugh."

Belle sat down helplessly in the low chair by her husband, feeling utterly lost. Was she never to be able even to guess at his moods? She had imagined that this would be the most bitter of blows, and he found it provocative of laughter. "I'm so glad you take it that way, John," she began, "I was afraid — "

"Afraid of what? By the way, he is here, I suppose. You haven't sent him elsewhere, or done anything foolish, I hope?"

"Why should I send him away? I don't understand — "

"Oh, nothing! Only,— you see, when you have got to keep on the right side of a man it is as well

[1] Literally, a footman.

not to be too particular. I suppose you have been talking about the money. What did he say?"

A slow colour crept into Belle's face. "Not much,— at least,— I don't think we talked about it at all. There were so many other things."

John Raby whistled a tune; then he smiled. "Upon my soul, you are sometimes quite incomprehensible, Belle; but perhaps it is as well. You might have put your foot in it somehow; and as it is absolutely necessary that the legacy should remain in the business, we must be careful. If we play our cards decently this ridiculous resurrection won't make much difference. You see, Marsden is a gentleman. He wouldn't ruin anybody, least of all a woman he — Hullo! what's the matter now?"

Her hand gripped his arm almost painfully. "Don't, John, don't! For pity's sake, don't!"

"Phew! you needn't pinch me black and blue, my dear, for hinting at the truth. You know what Marsden did to save you once. Why shouldn't he do something to save you now? There is no use mincing matters when one is in a corner like this. I mean to have the use of that money, and if we play our cards fairly we shall get it. I *mean* to have it, and you're bound to help; for, though I don't wish to reproach you, Belle, you must see that you are mainly responsible for the position."

"I!"

"Yes, you. If it hadn't been for your squeamishness I should still have been a civilian and able to go back on my tracks. Then again, but for having to quarrel with Shunker for his impudence, I should only have been at half-risks; he would have had to sink or swim with me, and that would have ensured his advancing more capital. The fact is that luck has been against me all through."

"What is it you want me to do?" she asked faintly. "How can I help?"

"Oh, if you ask in that tragedy-tone it's no use answering. I want you to be sensible, that is all. There really is nothing to make a fuss about. I'll ensure him a fair interest. And his coming back doesn't alter our position; we have been living on his money for the last year."

"But we thought he was dead — that it was ours. Oh, John, there is a difference! Don't you see he is tied; — that he has no choice, as it were?"

"If you mean that Marsden is a gentleman and sees that the predicament is none of our making, then I agree."

She knelt down beside him, looking into his face with passionate entreaty in hers. "John!" she said, "I can't make you understand, but if you love me, — ever so little — don't, don't beg of — of this man. Surely we have taken enough! You have some money of your own,— indeed I would rather starve!

It would kill me if you took advantage of,— of his kindness." Then, seeing the hopelessness of rousing sympathy in him, she buried her face against the arm of his chair with a sob of pain.

"I'll tell you what I do know, Belle," he answered kindly enough. "It was a confounded shame of Marsden to upset your nerves by popping up like a Jack-in-the-box. You're not a bit strong yet. Go and lie down till breakfast-time, and leave me to settle it. Why, you little goose, you don't think I'm going down on my knees to beg of any man! I am only, very wisely, going to take advantage of the natural strength of the position. It isn't as if you had ever cared a button for him, you know."

Something like a flash of lightning shot down from heaven on poor Belle, shrivelling up all her strength. She crept away to her room, and there, with flaming cheeks, paced up and down wondering why the sky didn't fall on the house and kill every one; every one but Philip. The memory of the night before had come back to fill her with shame and doubt, and yet with a great certainty. When had she felt so happy, so content? When had she talked to John, straight out from her very heart, as she had talked to Philip? What must he have thought? That she had been seeking to please him; as John called it, trying to play her cards well? No! he would not think such things; and yet the alternative was even less

honourable to her. What had possessed her? She, John's wife, who had tried,— who had always tried so hard to be content! How had this inconceivable thing come about? Preposterous! Absurd; it had not come about; it could not, should not, must not be. Yet, after all, what was the use in denying it? Philip stood far above John in her Pantheon. She had known that for months. But then it was allowable to canonise the dead. Why had he come back? Above all, why had he brought his saintship with him? So the circle of passionate resentment at fate, and still more passionate contempt for herself, went round and round, bringing no conclusion. She would have liked to throw herself on her bed and cry her eyes out; but, trivial yet insuperable barrier to this relief, it was too near breakfast-time for tears, since no one must guess at her trouble.

So she appeared at the appointed time, and asked Philip if he had slept well, and if he would take tea or coffee; and no one knew that she was wondering half the time why the sky didn't fall down and crush her for noticing that Philip saw she was pale, that Philip handed her the butter, and Philip looked to her always for an opinion. What right had he to do all this when her husband did not? Poor Belle; she had dreamed dreams only to find herself, as she thought, in the most despicable position in which a woman can possibly find herself. She never paused

to ask if the verdict of society in its more virtuous moods was trustworthy, and that a woman who discovers some other man to be nearer the sun than her husband, must necessarily call her marriage a failure, and so forfeit some measure of her self-respect. Her righteous ignorance simply made her feel, as she looked at the well-laid table, that here were all the elements of a *mariage à trois;* an idea hateful to her, and from which, according to what she had been taught, the only escape was flight. Yet how could there be flight if John would not give up the money? And then the thought that the table laid for two last night had been ever so much more pleasant, came to reduce her reasoning powers to pulp. She listened to the story of poor Dick's will,—that will which had led to the present puzzle,—feeling that the half-excuse it gave to John's avarice, was but another rivet in the chain which bound her life to Philip's; for with his kind face before her eyes, and his kind voice in her ears, it was useless denying the tie between them. That was the worst of it; she knew perfectly well that, as he sat there calmly talking to her husband, silence was no protection to her feelings. He knew them, just as she knew of a certainty what his were; not by any occult power, not by any mysterious affinity, but by the clear-eyed reason which affirms that, given certain conditions and certain ideals, the

result is also certain. And yet, while she acknowledged her confidence in him, something, she knew not what, rebelled against his sympathy; it was an interference, an offence.

"It is a pity you did not take the will," she said coldly. "It would have saved us all a great deal of annoyance." The patience in his reply made her still more angry. She positively preferred her husband's frown, as he suggested with a very different tone in his voice, that if Major Marsden had finished breakfast he should come and talk over details in the office.

"But I should like your wife — " began Philip.

"John is much better at business than I am," interrupted Belle. "I don't take much interest in that sort of thing, and,— I would rather not, thank you."

So the two men whom fate had always placed in such strange antagonism to each other sat amicably arranging the business, while Belle wandered about from one occupation to another, angry with herself for knowing which of the two had her interest most at heart.

"It's all settled, Belle!" cried her husband gaily, as they came in to lunch. "Marsden's a trump! but we knew that before, didn't we? You'll never regret it though, Philip, for it is twenty per cent. and no mistake. I say, Belle! we must have a

bottle of champagne to drink to the new firm, Marsden, Raby, and Co."

He hurried off for the wine, leaving Belle and the Major alone. Marsden, Raby, and Co.! Horrible, detestable! Nor was the position bettered by Philip's remark that there was no other way out of it at present. Dick's will might turn up, if, as was not unlikely, some one had buried the poor lad; there was no doubt that some one had looked after his effects in the shanties. At all events her husband had arranged to pay back the money, by instalments, so soon as possible. All this only made her reply stiffly, that she was sure John would do his utmost to lessen the risk.

"I shall leave it in his hands, at any rate," said Philip, who despite his pity and sympathy was human. "I shan't trouble you much with interference. By the way, when does the train leave to-night? I shall have to be going on my way."

"What's that?" cried John, returning with the champagne. "Going away? Nonsense! You must see the new house, your new house for the time being. And then there is the new dam; you must see that as member of the firm, mustn't he, Belle?"

Her silence roused Philip's old temper. "Yes, I suppose I ought to see it all. Afzul is leaving to-night, as he has business somewhere or other, but I will stop till to-morrow. We might ride over in the

morning to the house, if you have a horse at my disposal?"

"They are all at your disposal," said Belle quickly. "Major Marsden can ride Suleimân, John. I shall not want him."

They dined in the garden again that evening, but it was a different affair, and the perception that it was so added to Belle's wild rebellion at the position in which she found, or fancied she found, herself. When they stood out under the stars again saying good-night, Belle's hand lay in Philip's for an instant while John filled himself a tumbler from the tray in the verandah. Somehow the tragedy of her face proved too much for the humour of the man, who knew himself guiltless of all save a great tenderness. "I am not going to bite my poor Belle!" he said with a smile half of amusement, half of annoyance. "You needn't call in the aid of the policeman, I assure you."

She looked at him angrily, but as she turned away there were tears in her eyes.

He sat on the edge of his bed once more, pondering over the events of the day, but this time there was no doubt in his mind at all. He cared more for Belle's peace than for anything else in the world. He would go away for a while; but he would not give her up; he would prove to her that there was no need for that.

To his surprise she was waiting in the verandah when he came out of his room at daybreak next morning. She looked business-like and self-reliant, as all women do in their riding-habits, and she was fastening a rose at her collar.

"John's not quite ready," she remarked easily; "but he said we had better go on and he would catch us up. I want to see about the garden. The roses here are mine, and as some of them are quite pretty, — this one for instance — won't you take it? you can't have seen many roses lately — I intend moving them. By the bye, I've sent out breakfast, so as your train doesn't leave till midnight we can have a jolly day."

Philip, fastening the rose in his buttonhole, wondered if the best parlour with all the covers off was not worse than calls on the policeman. Both seemed to him equally unnecessary, but then he had all the advantage in position. He could show his friendship in an unmistakable way, while poor Belle had only the far harder task of receiving benefits.

"You don't remember Suleimân, my Arab at Faizapore?" she said as they cantered off. "You are riding him now, — oh, don't apologise, the pony does well enough for me; John gave me such a delightful surprise in buying him back after we were married."

"Got him dirt cheap from a woman who was afraid

to ride him," remarked John coming up behind cheerfully; and Belle was divided between vexation and pleasure at this depreciation of his own merits.

"I should think you rode pretty straight as a rule," said Philip, looking at her full in the face. "Many women make the mistake of jagging at a beast's mouth perpetually. If you can trust him, it's far better to leave him alone; don't you think so?"

"John, race me to the next *kikar* tree. It's our last chance, for we shall be among the corn soon. Come!"

Major Marsden, overtaking them at regulation pace, owned that Belle did ride very straight indeed. Perhaps she was right after all, and the position was untenable. He felt a little disheartened and weary, only his pride remained firm, telling him that he had a perfect right to settle the point as he chose. Surely he might at least rectify his own mistakes. The sun climbed up and up, and even in the cooler, greener river-land beat down fiercely on the stubble where here and there the oxen circled round on the threshing-floors and clouds of chaff, glittering like gold in the light, showed the winnower was at work. John was in his element, pointing out this field promised to indigo, and that village where a vat was to be built.

"It is getting a little hot for Mrs. Raby to be

out," remarked Philip, though he was quite aware it would be an offence.

"By George, it is late! Look, Belle! there's the house beyond those trees on the promontory. It is three miles round, but if you cut across, so, by the sand, it's only one and a half. Marsden and I will go the other way. I have to see a village first, and then we can look at the new dam."

"It is over yonder, I suppose?" said Philip pointing to a likely bend in the river bank.

"Just so."

"Then I will see Mrs. Raby across the cut, and join you there."

"But I can manage quite well by myself," protested Belle.

"I have no interest in villages, Mrs. Raby; and, — excuse me — before we start your pony's girths require tightening." He slipped from his horse and was at her side before she could reply.

"Then I'm off," cried John with a faint shrug of his shoulders. "I'll meet you at the corner, Marsden, in twenty minutes."

"Steady, lad, steady!" murmured the Major with his head under the flap of the saddle, as Suleimân figeted to join his stable-companion. Belle standing, tapping her boot with her whip, moved forward. "Give me the reins. I don't see why you should do everything."

Philip came up from the girths smiling, and began on the curb.

"What a fidget you are! I'm glad John isn't like that."

"Curbs and girths mean more than you suppose. There! now you can go neck-and-crop at everything, and I won't say you nay. Steady, lad, steady! One, two, three — are you all right?"

"Thank you, I think I have the proper number of hands and feet, and so far as I know my head is on my shoulders," replied Belle tartly.

They dipped down a bit from the fields to a sluggish stream edging the higher land, and then scampered across the muddy flats towards the promontory which lay right at the other side of the bend.

"Pull up please!" cried Philip. "That strip looks *quick*."

"Nonsense! John comes this way every week; it's all right." Belle gave her pony a cut, making it forge ahead; but it was no match for Suleimân who, unaccustomed to the spur, bounded past her.

"Pull up, please; don't be foolish, pull up!" Philip shouted, hearing the ominous *cloop* of his horse's feet. Another dig of the spur, a leap, a flounder, and Suleimân was over the creek. Not so Belle's pony; slower, heavier, it was hopelessly bogged in a second, and floundering about, sank deeper and deeper.

"Throw yourself off!" cried Philip; "as far as you can,— arms flat! So,— quite still, please. There is no danger. I can get at you easily, and it is not deep." A minute after his hand closed on her wrist as she lay sinking slowly despite her stillness; for the pony, relieved of her weight, was plunging like a mad thing and churning up the sand and water to slush. "I must get a purchase first; these sands hold like birdlime;" he said after an ineffectual attempt. "Don't be frightened if I let go for a moment." Then with one hand through Suleimân's stirrup he knelt once more on the extreme edge of the firm ground and got a grip of Belle again. "Now then,— all together!" More all together than he desired, for Suleimân, alarmed at the strain, backed violently, reared, and finally broke away, leaving Philip prone on his back in the dirt. "I hope I didn't hurt you," he said, struggling up, rather blindly, to aid Belle's final flounder to safe ground.

"Not much," she replied with a nervous laugh as she shook the curiously dry sand from her habit. "My wrist will be a bit black and blue, that's all. Why, Philip, what's the matter? Philip!"

He had doubled up limply, horribly, as if he had been shot, and lay in a heap at her feet.

"Philip! What is it?"

As she slipped her arm beneath him to raise his

head, something warm and wet trickled over it,— blood!

"The wound," he murmured. "My handkerchief,— anything,— I am sorry." Then the pain died out of his face and his head felt heavy on her arm.

The wound! She sought for it by the aid of that ghastly trickle only to find, when she tore the coverings away, that it was no trickle, but an intermittent gushing. That must be stopped somehow, — her handkerchief, his handkerchief, her own little white hands. It had all passed so quickly that it seemed but a minute since he had cried "Pull up," and there she was with his head on her knee, face downwards, and the warm blood soaking over her. People make long stories afterwards of such scenes; but as a matter of fact they derive all their horror from their awful swiftness.

Belle, bareheaded in the sunlight, was full of one frantic desire to see the face hidden away in her habit. Was he dead? Was that the reason why the blood oozed slower and slower? She craned over his close-cropped hair only to see the outline of his cheek. "Philip, Philip!" she whispered in his ear; but there was no answer. Was it five minutes, was it ten, was it an hour since she had sat there with her hands —? Ah, ghastly, ghastly! She could not look at them; and yet for no temptation in the world would she have moved a finger, lest he

was not dead and she,— oh, blessed thought! — was staving death aside.

A shout behind, and her husband tearing down at a mad gallop, alarmed at the return of the riderless horse. "Good God! Belle! what has happened?"

"Look, and tell me if he is dead," she said. "Quick! I want to know,— I want to know!"

He was not dead, and yet the bleeding had stopped. Then they must get him home; get him somewhere as best they could. A string bed was brought from the nearest village, with relays of willing yet placid bearers; Belle walked beside it, in Philip's helmet, for her own hat had been lost in the quicksand, keeping her hand on the rough bandages while John raced ahead to set the doors open. It was dreary crossing the threshold of the new house, with the jostling, shuffling footsteps of those who carry something that is death's or will be death's. But there was a light in Belle's eyes, and even her husband, accustomed as he was to her even nerves, wondered at her calm decision. Since they must procure a doctor as quickly as possible, the best plan would be for John to ride across country to a station where the afternoon mail stopped. To return to Saudaghur and a mere hospital assistant would be needless delay. She did not mind, she said, being left alone; and meanwhile they must send for

a supply of necessaries since it was evident that Philip could not be moved, at any rate for a day or two. So Belle sat in the big empty room, which by and by was to be hers, and watched alone by the unconscious man, feeling that it was her turn now. It was a vigil not to be forgotten. And once as she raised his head on her arm in order to moisten his lips with the stimulant which alone seemed to keep life in him, he stirred slightly, his eyes opened for a second, and a faint murmur reached her ear, "No need for a policeman."

A smile, pathetic in its absolute self-surrender, came to her face as she stooped and kissed him with the passion of protection and possession which a mother has for her helpless child; and that is a love which casts out fear. As she crouched once more beside the coarse pallet where he lay, for the room was destitute of all furniture save the string woven bed, Belle Raby, for the first time in her life, faced facts undistorted by her own ideals, and judged things as they were, not as they ought to be. She loved this man; but what was that love? Was it a thing to be spoken of with bated breath just because the object happened to be a person whom, all things consenting, one might have married? Her nature was healthy and unselfish; her knowledge of the "devastating passion" which is said to devour humanity was derived entirely from a pious but un-

reasoning belief in what she was told. It is not the fashion nowadays to say so, but that is really the position in which a vast majority of women find themselves in regard to many social problems. And so, in that dreary, shadowy room, with the man she loved dependent on her care for his sole chance of life, Belle Raby asked herself wherein lay the sin or shame of such a love as hers, and found no answer.

And yet, when her husband returned with the doctor, he brought back with him also the old familiar sense that something, she knew not what, was wrong. The old resentment, born of the old beliefs, at the odious position in which she found herself. But now she tried to set these thoughts aside as unworthy, unworthy of her own self, above all unworthy of Philip.

CHAPTER XX.

Afzul Khân was sitting in Shunker Dâs's house at Faizapore with a frown upon his face. He had come all the way in order to consult Mahomed Lateef, the old Syyed, about a certain blue envelope which was hidden away in his *posteen*, only to find that the old man had retreated before his enemies to his last foothold of land, while the usurer had enlarged his borders at the expense of the ruined old chief's ruined house.

Now Mahomed Lateef was Afzul Khân's patron. In this way. The latter was foster-brother to that dead son who had died gloriously in the regiment, and who had been born at an outpost on the frontier. Indeed, but for the old man, Afzul would never have put the yoke of service round his neck. So his frown was not only on account of his useless journey; much of it was anger at his old friend's misfortunes, and those who had taken advantage of them. It angered him to see a blue monkey painted on the wall in front of which the staunch Mohammedan used to say his prayers; it angered him still more to see the rows of cooking-pots where there used to be but one. Yet business was business, and

Shunker might be able to tell him what had become of the Commissariat-Colonel *sahib's* daughter; for Afzul had had the address of the letter spelt out for him by a self-satisfied little schoolboy at Kohât, and knew enough of poor Dick's family history to suppose that Belle Stuart must be his cousin.

"Estuart *sahib's* daughter," echoed Shunker, a sullen scowl settling on his face; as it always did at the memory of his wrongs. "Why she married that *shaitan* Raby who lives at Saudaghur now, because he was turned out of the service. *Wah!* a fine pair, and a fine tale. She had a lover, Marsden of a Sikh regiment, who paid for her with lakhs on lakhs. Then, when he was killed, she took the money and married Raby. Scum! and they talk about our women, bah!"

This was not all malice and uncharitableness on the usurer's part; for it must be remembered that, if we know very little of Indian social life, the natives know still less of ours; the result being, on both sides, the explanation of strange phenomena by our own familiar experience; and this is not, as a rule, a safe guide in conditions of which we know nothing.

Afzul gave a guttural snort, startling but expressive. "She married Raby! Truly it is said 'The journeyings of fools are best not made.' And Marsden *sahib* — long life to him! — was her lover! *Inshallah!* she might have found a worse."

"Before the worms got him," chuckled Shunker; "and then his money was worth another fine man. That is woman's way, white or black."

"Raby *sahib's mem*," repeated Afzul meditatively. "There thou speakest truth, O Shunker. He is with her now." The memory of those two, standing together hand in hand, came to him and he nodded his head approvingly, for the thought that Belle's allegiance might return to its original object commended itself to his mind; his view of the subject not being occidental.

"Who is with her now?" asked Shunker with a stare.

"Marsden *sahib*. Hast not heard he hath come back to life?"

The usurer's eyes almost started from his head. "Come back!" he shrieked. "He is not dead! Oh holy Lukshmi! what offerings to thy shrine! Why, the *shaitan* will lose the money; he will have to give up the business; and I — oh Gunesh-*ji!* I am revenged, I am revenged!" He lay back on his bed gasping, gurgling, choking with spiteful laughter and real passionate delight.

The Pathan scowled. His knowledge of English law was limited, and he objected to laughter at Marsden *sahib's* expense. "If he gave it to the *mem* for what he got, as thou sayest, Shunker, Marsden *sahib* will never ask it back. He will take the woman instead; that is but fair."

"Thou dost not understand their crooked ways," gasped Shunker; "and 'tis waste of time to explain. So Marsden *sahib* is alive again; that is news indeed! *Hurri Gunga!* I must go down to Saudaghur and felicitate the *shaitan* on his friend's return. He! he! on his friend's return!"

Afzul felt the longing of the frontiersman to stick a knife in a fat Hindu stomach, but he refrained. The blue envelope was going to be a heavier responsibility than he had thought for, and till that was settled he must not wander into by-ways. No matter how the pig-faced idolater had lied in other things, it was true, about the *mem* and the Major, he had seen that with his own eyes. Had Dick *sahib* been her lover too? And what did both those brave ones see in such a poor, thin creature? Truly the ways of the *sahib-logue* were past finding out. Nevertheless he would seek out the old Khân, and see what he said. Shunker might be lying, all except that about the *mem-sahib* and the Major; that was true.

It was well on to noon when Afzul, after many hours of varied travelling by train, by canal, and finally on foot, found himself in Mahomed Lateef's last few acres of land. Of a surety they were not ones to be voluntarily chosen as a resting-place; bare of everything save the sparse stalks of last year's millet crop, showing all too clearly how scanty that

crop had been; bare to the very walls of the half-ruined tower which stood supported on one side by the mud hovel occupied by the owner. A significant fact, that bareness, showing the lack of flocks and herds, the lack of everything that was not wanted for immediate use. And as he stood at the open door of the yard, it also showed clean-swept and garnished, dire sign of the poverty which allows nothing to go to waste. Yet it was not empty of all, for as the Pathan knocked again, a child, bubbling over with laughter, ran from a dark door into the sunlight.

"Nâna, Nâna! [grand-dad] catch, catch!" it cried, and its little legs, unsteady though they were, kept their advantage on the long ones behind, long but old; crippled too with rheumatism and want of food to keep the stern old heart in fighting order; yet bubbling over with laughter, also, was the stern old face. "Catch thee, gazelle of the desert! fleetest son of Byramghor! Who could catch thee? Ah, God and his Prophet! thou hast not hurt thyself, little heart of my heart! What, no tears? Fâtma, Fâtma! the boy hath fallen and on my life he hath not shed a tear. *Ai*, the bold heart! *ai*, the brave man!"

An old woman, bent almost double with age, crept from the door. She kissed the child's feet as it sat throned in its grandfather's arms. Her lips could

reach no higher, but that was high enough for worship. "He never cries! None of them cried, and he is like them all," she crooned. "Dost have a mind, Khân *sahib*, of Futteh Mahomed falling?—the first, and I so frightened. There was a scratch a finger long on his knee and —"

"Peace, Fâtma, and go back! There is a stranger at the door. Go back, I say!"

It was a difficult task to draw the veil over those bent shoulders, but the old woman's wrinkled hands did their best as she scurried away obediently.

"*Salaam Alaikoom!*" said the Pathan. "The mother may return. It is I, Afzul, brother of the breast."

"Afzul!" The old martinet's face grew dark. "The only Afzul I knew was a runaway and a deserter. Art thou he?"

"Ay! Khân *sahib*," replied the man calmly. "I ran away because I had sold my life to Marsden *sahib*, and I wanted to buy it back again. I have done it, and I am free."

"Marsden *sahib!* 'Tis long since I heard that name. Allah be with the brave! Pity there was none to stand between him and death as on that day when my son died."

"Thou liest, Khân *sahib*. I stood in my brother's place. Marsden *sahib* is not dead. I left him three days ago at Saudaghur."

"Not dead? This is a tale! A prisoner no doubt. *Inshallah!* my blood scents something worth words. Here, Fâtma, take the child; or, stay, it's best he should hear too. Such things sink through the skin and strengthen the heart. And bring food, woman, what thou hast, and no excuses. A brave man stomachs all save insult."

So, with the child on his knee, the old soldier listened to Afzul Khân's story, while in the dark room beyond the women positively shed tears of shame over the poor appearance which the plain *bajra*,[1] cakes, unsweetened, unbuttered, presented on the big brass platter.

"There is the boy's curdled milk," suggested his sad-faced mother. "He will not mind for a day."

"Peace, unnatural!" scolded the grandmother. "The boy's milk, forsooth! What next? Women nowadays have no heart. A strange man, and the boy's milk forsooth!"

Haiyât *bibi* blushed under her brown skin. Hers was a hard life with her husband far over the black water, and this stern old man and woman for gaolers. But the boy was hers; she hugged that knowledge to her heart and it comforted her.

The evening drew in, the child dozed off to sleep, but not one jot or tittle of adventure was to be passed over in silence. "*Inshallah!* but thou didst well!"

[1] Small millet; the food of the poorest.

"God send the traitors to hell!" "Ay! Marsden *sahib* was ever the bravest of the brave!" These and many another exclamation testified to the old campaigner's keen interest. But when Afzul began tentatively to question him about the blue envelope, the light died from the hollow eyes. Raby *sahib?* Nay, he knew nought, save that the people said it was the *mem-sahib's* money he was spending in this new talk of indigo and what not. He wished them no ill, but Murghub Ahmad, far away in the Andamans, had saved the *mem* from insult,— perhaps worse — and she had given evidence against him in the trial. He wished no man ill, but if what the people said was true, and Raby *sahib's* new dam would prevent the river from doing its duty, then it would be a different matter. Ay! the new factory was but ten miles up the river, but no one lived there as yet.

Now the matter of the blue envelope became more and more oppressive to Afzul Khân the more he thought of it. Easy enough to send it anonymously to Raby *sahib's mem*, and so be quit of it once for all; but what if she had taken the Major's money, as Shunker asserted, in order to buy a new husband? And what if this paper of Eshmitt *sahib's* meant more loot? Afzul was, all unconsciously, jealous of this white-faced *mem*, and but for a strange sort of loyalty to the boy he had betrayed would have liked

to put the letter in the fire, shake himself loose of all ties, and return to his people.

"Nay! thou askest more than I have to give," replied Mahomed Lateef to his questioning. "I know 'tis on paper they leave their moneys, for, as I said, the Colonel *sahib* once asked me — 'twas in China, during the war — to set my name as witness to something."

"Was it long-shaped, in a blue cover?" asked Afzul, eagerly.

"There was no cover, but it was long, like the summons from the courts. Stay! if thy mind be really set on such knowledge there is a friend of my poor Murghub's — one who pleads in the courts — even now resting in his father's village but a space from here. He must know more than thou canst want to hear."

So in the cool of the next morning Afzul walked through the barren fields to see the pleader. A keen-faced sallow young man, seemingly glad to escape for the time from patent-leather boots and such like products of civilisation. The Pathan found him squatting over against a *hookah* and basking in the sunshine like the veriest villager. For all that he was fulfilled with strange knowledge of law and order as administered by the alien, and Afzul sat open-eyed while he discoursed of legacies, and settlements, of the *feme covert* and the

Married Women's Property Act, with a side glance at divorces and permanent alimony — strange topics to be gravely discussed at the gateway of an Indian village through which men were carried to their rest and women to their bridal beds, with scant appeal to anything but custom. It utterly confused Afzul, though it sent him away convinced that the blue envelope must mean the loot of another lover to the *mem-sahib*.

"I will wait," he said to himself decisively; "yes, I will wait until she is faithful and goes back to the Major; then, as that pleader fellow says, he will get the money. But if *he* leaves her and takes his money instead, then I will send her the envelope. That is but fair. God and his Prophet! but their ways are confusing. 'Tis better to steal and fight as we do; it makes the women faithful."

That evening he spent half an hour with a needle and thread, borrowed from old Fâtma, in sewing the blue envelope safely into his skin-coat. Then he sat once more stirring the old Mohammedan's blood with tales of fight and adventure till far on into the night. Yet the earliest blink of dawn found him creeping away from the still sleeping household, and his right arm bare of a massive gold bracelet he had worn for years. That he had left lying on the baby's pillow; for was not the child the son of his brother? Had not his father saved Marsden *sahib*

also? Ah! that score was not paid off yet. He still seemed to see the tall figure standing in the sunlight. Fool that he had been not to fire, instead of giving himself away at a mere word! Even now, though he knew that but for him Philip Marsden's bones would have been churning in a dreary dance of death at the bottom of some boiling pool in the Terwân torrent, he felt the bitterness of defeat. His very admiration, growing as it did with the other's display of pluck, added to his resentment. To take an order from a man when you had your finger on the trigger of your rifle! It was all very well to save a wounded comrade, to stand by him through thick and thin, but that did not show him, or convince yourself, that you cared as little for his menace as he had done for yours. Some day, yes, some day! he would stand up before Marsden *sahib* and defy him. Then he could cry quits, and go home to his own people in peace.

Nevertheless, the news of his master's accident which met him on his return to Saudaghur sent him without an instant's pause to the factory where Philip still lay unconscious. And when he walked, at the dead of night, into the big bare room where Belle sat watching, his face softened at the sight of that dark head on the pillow. It softened still more when something of the past — Heaven knows what — seemed to come with him, rousing a low, quick

voice from the bed. "Afzul, it is cold; put on more fuel. Do you not feel the cold? Afzul, Afzul!" For that something had carried Philip Marsden back to the smoky cave among the snows, although the windows stood wide open to let in the tardy coolness of the summer night.

The Pathan drew himself together and stood at attention. "*Huzoor!*" he answered quietly. "It is done; the fire blazes."

Belle in the half-shadows thrown by the sheltered lamp stood up looking kindly at the new-comer. "I'm glad you have come, Afzul," she whispered; "he has been calling for you so often."

Behind his military salute the man smiled approvingly. She was of the right sort, faithful to the old love. Marsden *sahib* should marry her and get the money, if that was the way they managed things over the black water. And this solution of the question grew upon him as he watched her unfailing devotion when, between them, they helped the sick man through the dreary trouble which was all too familiar to the Pathan. "It was so in the cave," he would say, as time dragged on through days when the sick man lay still and silent, through nights when the quick hurried words never seemed to leave his lips and it was all they could do to keep on the bandages.

"It's the bullet in the shoulder blade that's troub-

lin' him," said the clever little Irish doctor, who rode forty miles every day between two trains in order to see his patient and keep an eye on his hospital. "Put three more days' strength into him, Mrs. Raby, and I'll bring over another man and we'll have at it somehow. The wound has niver haled, and niver will till it gets a fair chance."

Shortly after this Belle found herself pacing up and down the verandah, scarcely daring to think of what was going on within. Would he die? Was this really the end? Was it to be peace at last, and no more struggle? And lo and behold! when the doctors let her into the room again he was lying with a smile on his face, because the pain, the ceaseless pain which had annihilated everything else in the world, was gone.

"I've given you a lot of trouble," he said; and even as he spoke fell asleep from sheer, blessed ease.

After that again came a time when even Afzul stood aside and let the *mem* take the lead while he sat watching her curiously — a time when it positively seemed more to her that Philip should take so many spoonfuls of nourishment every hour than that he should get better; when the content of immediate success blotted out the thought of future failure, and the fear of death was forgotten in the desire of staving it off. Most people who have nursed a case in which even the doctors stay their hands and wait on

Nature, know that strange dream-like life wherein the peaks and passes on the temperature chart seem by contraries to raise or depress the whole world. Belle fought the fight bravely; and not until she stood one day looking at a thermometer which registered normal did she feel a sinking at her heart. They had come down into the low levels of life; they were back in the work-day world. Yet it was not the one they had left six weeks before. Even outwardly it had changed. The last green blade of grass had withered to a brown shadow on the sun-baked soil, and the dust-storms of May swept over the half-finished house.

"It looks dreary enough now, but just you wait till next year," said John Raby, in his cheerful confident way. "The new dam will be finished, I hope, the water will come in at high level to the garden, the place will be a paradise of flowers, and we shall be dividing thirty per cent. profit! There's a prospect! Oh, by the way, did I ever tell you that beast Shunker Dâs came down just after you did, Marsden, expecting to find me on my back like a turned turtle? His face, when he saw I was jolly as a sand-boy, was a caution! By George! that man does hate me and no mistake."

Belle moved a step nearer her husband and laid her hand on the back of his easy-chair. Perhaps it was only his good-nature in leaving her free to nurse

Philip, but somehow she felt they had drifted far apart during the past six weeks. "I seem to have heard nothing," she began, wistfully.

"Better employed on the head of the firm, my dear," he replied with a laugh. "You do her credit, Marsden. And now I must be off again, for there is some idiotic fuss at a village a few miles off. Shunker's work, I expect; but we are too strong for him. Even the native recognises the almighty dollar, and if they will only have patience, I'll engage to treble the revenue of this district. Well, good-bye, Belle. I'll be back to-morrow or next day. Soon as I can 'get,' as the Americans say. Take care of yourselves."

When he had gone the punkah went on swinging, Belle's hands knitted busily, Philip's lay idle in the languor of convalescence; all was as before, and yet there was a difference — a difference of which each was conscious, and which brought a certain restraint.

"Why does Shunker hate him?" asked Major Marsden.

There was no lack of confidence now between these two, and if he asked many questions, she was quite ready to answer them faithfully, according to her lights. In this one, however, she failed to give a just impression, for the simple reason that she herself had no conception of the extent of the usurer's malice. In fact, his impotent rage on discovering

that Philip's return had apparently made no difference to the Rabys would have been incredible to an educated Englishwoman, had she been aware of it, which she was not. The man, coming down to Saudaghur expectant of consternation, had found nothing but a stir of fresh enterprise which his keen business eye told him meant money. He wandered about from village to village, noting the golden seed being sown by his adversary, until the thought of the harvest in which he would have no share positively worried him into spleen and ague. And as he lay among the simple village folk a fresh idea for revenge came to console him. It is never hard to change the stolid opposition of the Indian peasant into stolid obstruction. No overt injustice is required; nothing but a disregard of custom. And so Shunker, taking advantage of the short period during which he had been associated in partnership with John Raby, began cautiously to call in debts in the name of the firm. Now in an Indian village a debt to the ancestral usurer is a debt; that is to say no flighty ephemeral liability which may crop up at any time claiming payment, but a good, solid inheritance going back sometimes a generation or two; a patent almost of solvency, a claim certainly for consideration at the hands of your banker; since a bumper crop might any day give you the upper-hand, or a bad one make it still more unwise for the creditor to

present his bill. Thus, when Shunker disregarded time-worn prejudices to the extent of asking one Peru, an old-established customer, to make a settlement, the latter looked as if the foundations of the round world had been moved.

"Pay," he said slowly, his broad nostrils inflated like those of a horse shying at novelty, "I am always paying, *buniah-ji*, year by year, one harvest or another. God knows how much, but 'tis the old way, and old ways are good."

"They are good," sighed the usurer, piously. "I like them myself, Peru; but new masters have new ways."

"New masters do not make new land," retorted the peasant shrewdly enough. "That remains the same. It must be sown; yet when I ask the seed-grain, as my fathers have done, the answer is '*Pay!*' Pay! of course I will pay when the crops ripen. Does not harvest mean payment to the peasant?"

"Your crops won't ripen long on those fields, I'm afraid, my poor Peru! The *sahib* wants land, here, everywhere, for this new factory of his. The men who will not pay will see what befalls. A little will go this year, a little more next. If I were alone 'twould be a different matter, for I was ever faithful to my friends."

Shunker's air of virtuous distress was admirable, but Peru laughed; the rough peasant laugh full of

broad toleration. "As vermin to the Pathan, so are the grain-dealers to the farmer! We warm you, and you feed on us till you grow troublesome, then — off goes the coat! One *buniah* is like another; why then dost change?"

"I change not, dunderhead!" cried Shunker enraged at a certain slow superiority in the other. "'Tis Raby *sahib* claims payment."

"Then tell Raby *sahib* I will pay when the river comes. It will come this year perhaps, if not, next year; if luck be bad, it may tarry twain, not longer. It comes ever sooner or later; then, let us talk of payment."

Shunker leaned forward, his evil face kindling with malice. "But what, Peru, if the river never returns? What if Raby *sahib's* new dam is built to prevent the water coming, so that he may have a grip on the land? What if the seed-grain thou sowest springs green, to die yellow, year after year?"

Pera Ditta's ox-eyes opened helplessly. What if the river never returned? The idea was too vast for him, and yet it remained with him long after Shunker had gone to sow the same seed of mischief in other minds. He did it deftly, taking care not to turn the screw too tightly at first, lest he should bring down on himself the villagers' final argument of the stick. The reason given by the Laird of

Inverawe for hanging the Laird of Inverie, "that he just didna like him," has been given before now as fair cause for doing an unfortunate usurer to death with quarterstaves. So Shunker did not disturb primeval calm too rudely. Nevertheless as he paused for a night ere returning to Faizapore, in the empty house at Saudaghur, where Kirpo had passed the months of Râmu's captivity, he felt content with his labours. He had started a stone of unpopularity on its travels, which by and by would bring down an avalanche on his enemy.

As he lounged on the string bed, set for coolness on the flat roof, he told himself, not without a measure of truth, that sooner or later all his enemies perished. Ah, if it were only as easy to keep those you loved in life, as it was to drive those you hated down to death! But it was not; and the thought of frail, sickly Nuttu came, as it often did, to take the savour even from revenge. The memory of deserted Kirpo's sons, — those strapping youngsters whom he had often seen playing on that very roof — made him groan and roll over on his fat stomach to consider the possibility of marrying yet another wife. He had married so many only to find disappointment! As his face came back, disheartened, to the unsympathetic stars which fought against him, he started as if he had been shot. For there was Kirpo herself tall and menacing standing

beside the bed. The veil wrapped tightly round her body, left her disfigured death's-head face visible.

"Don't be more of a coward than need be," she said scornfully, as the Lâlâ, after shooting up like a Jack-in-the-box, began to sidle away from her, his dangling legs swinging wildly in his efforts to move his fat form. "I've not come to beat the breath from thy carcase. 'Twill die soon enough, never fear; and just now there is a son to perform the obsequies. There won't be one by and by."

The indifference of her voice, and the aptness of her words to his own thoughts, roused the Lâlâ's rage. "What dost want, hag of a noseless one?" he shrieked, "she-devil! base-born! — "

"Not bad words, Lâlâ," she interrupted calmly. "I've had enough of them. I want money. I'm starving; thou knowest it. What else could I be?"

"Starving!" The word rolled sweeter than any honey under Shunker's tongue. "Then starve away. So thou thoughtest to trick me — me! How didst like the bangles, Kirpo dear? the brave bangles,— he,—he!"

To his surprise the allusion failed to touch her. Instead of breaking into abuse she looked at him curiously, drew her veil so as to hide all but her great dark eyes, and squatted down, as if for a chat, on the ground opposite to him.

"Look here, Lâlâ!" she said. "This is no matter

for ill words; 'tis business. What is past, is past. I'm going to give thee a chance for the future — a last chance! Dost hear? So I've come to say I am starving. For six months I paid for my food in this very place; paid for it in thy pleasure. Fair and square so far. But now, because of that pleasure, Râmu is in jail again and I am noseless. Then Râmu's people have taken his sons,— *hai! hai!* his beautiful sons — from me because of that pleasure. Is not that payment enough, Lâlâ? Shall I starve also?"

"Why not?" chuckled Shunker, "I have no need of thee any more."

Kirpo leaned forward with hand raised in warning, her fierce eyes on his face. "Have a care, Lâlâ! Have a care! It is the last chance. Thou dost not want me; good. I asked for naught to be taken; I asked for something to be given."

"Not a *paisa*, not a *pai!*" broke in the usurer brutally. "I'm glad of thy starvation; I'm glad they've taken away thy sons."

"Stop, Lâlâ!" shrieked Kirpo, her calm gone, her voice ringing with passion. "I did not say *my* sons! I said Râmu's! Look, Shunker, look! I have another,— " as she spoke, she tore her veil aside — "in my arms, Lâlâ! Is he not fair and strong for a two months' babe? Would you not like to have him? No, no, hands off, no touching! He is mine,

I say, mine, mine!" She sprang to her feet holding the baby high above his head exultantly. He sat staring at it, and trembled like a leaf.

"Kirpo!" he gasped, "give it to me; by all the Gods in Heaven, I will pay —"

A peal of mocking laughter greeted the words. "Bah! Now I have roused thee. 'Tis all a lie, Shunker, all a lie! Only a trick of starving Kirpo's! And yet, somehow he favours thee as thou mightest have been before the grease came to spoil beauty. For all that not like Nuttu, the sickly one. Nuttu will die, this one will live. Wilt thou not, heart's darling and delight?" She covered the babe with a storm of passionate kisses.

"Kirpo! by all the torments of hell —" urged Shunker.

"What! art there already? Not so fast, Lâlâ! not so fast. Wait till I bring this babe to curse thy pyre, to spit on thy ashes,— thy son — thy son!"

"It is a lie!" burst in the wretched man, beside himself with doubt, certainty, and desire. "He is not mine."

"Well said, Shunker, well said!" laughed Kirpo triumphantly, growing calmer with her evident success. "He is not thine, he is mine." She folded her veil round the sleeping child with a flourish, as if to emphasise her words, and stepped backwards. As she stood there sombre, malignant, the winged

thoughts flew through Shunker's brain. There is, strictly speaking, no possible divorce, no remarriage for the Hindu; but if Râmu could be got out of the way, he, Shunker Dâs, might pose as a social reformer. It was a fine idea. Or he might,—a thousand suggestions found expression in the covetous hands he stretched towards his victim. "Kirpo, listen!"

"I will not listen. I gave the chance for the child's sake. Now—"

"Kirpo! take what thou likest—"

"I *will* take what I like, Lâlâ. That is revenge!" Before he could say another word she had turned her back on him, and ere he could rise to stop her was down the narrow stair and out into the street with her precious burden.

So Lâlâ Shunker Dâs lay down and cried, because not one of the women his wealth had bought could bear him a son save this Kirpo whom he had betrayed. Fool that he was not to have seen she must have some deep move on hand ere she came to beg of him! Revenge! He had dreamt of that himself; but what was his poor spite to this devilish malice? He tried to remember that want was a hard master; that Kirpo's own people came from beyond the fourth[1] river and were therefore useless to her as a refuge; that it was woman's way to bark more than bite. In

[1] The extreme south-east.

his heart of hearts he knew that she had said truly when she offered him his last chance. And, as a matter of fact, while he sat trying to recover confidence on the edge of his bed, Kirpo and the baby, with many a swing of the full skirts as she strode along, were making their way direct to the enemy's camp; in other words to John Raby's new factory. The *sahib* had interfered on her behalf once, and he hated Shunker. He could give her coolie's work on the new dam, and in return she could give him valuable information as to the usurer's little game. The Lâlâ had had his chance, partly for the sake of comfort, partly for the sake of the child. Now she would devote herself to revenge and gain a living at the same time.

Of all this, however, Belle was profoundly ignorant; nor did Kirpo say more to her new master than was necessary to show a sound, conceivable reason for her professions of attachment to his cause. John Raby laughed when he heard of his enemy's vows of vengeance; but he was wise enough to see the prospect of unpopularity with his poorer neighbours, and the advisability of being prepared for opposition.

"I hope you don't mind, Marsden," he said a day or two before the Major left, "but I've been treating with that truculent rascal of yours, Afzul. He's coming back to India, he says, next cold weather, on business or something. I've asked him to bring

me a gang of navvies and do overseer himself till next rainy season. Those hill-men work like Englishmen, and the new dam will require constant care until it solidifies; besides, I believe in mercenaries; a bandit is always handy."

"And Afzul consented?" asked Philip in surprise.

"Jumped at it. There is no one like the noble savage for turning an honest penny when he can, and I own to tempting him pretty stiffly. We may want that sort of fellow by and by to keep things going."

"I am surprised at Afzul for all that," continued Philip, thoughtfully. "I wonder what he means?"

"Devotion to you," laughed the other; "you should have heard him. And you too, Belle! He laid the butter on thick about your capabilities as a nurse."

She looked up quickly. "I suppose it's ungrateful, but I don't like that man. He always seems to have something in his mind that I can't get hold of."

"He is very intelligent," replied her husband with a shrug of his shoulders; "and took quite an interest in the business, I assure you; he asked a lot of questions. And, to tell the truth, I think a thoroughly devoted rascal is the most useful thing in creation; so I hope he is one."

Philip laughed. "Shall I leave my interests in his hands, Belle, or in yours?"

"Leave them to me, my dear fellow," interrupted John. "Belle doesn't understand business."

CHAPTER XXI.

Perhaps her husband was right in saying Belle did not understand business. At any rate she had little to do with it in the uneventful months which followed. It was a dry, hot year bringing no respite of rain to the long weary hours. It brought plenty of work, however, to John Raby, who was up with the dawn, and never seemed to tire or flag in his unceasing pursuit of success. In good sooth, as Belle confessed to herself, Philip could have found no better custodian for his money; and this knowledge was a great consolation,— how great she scarcely realised until something came to disturb it.

She was writing to Philip Marsden one day when John entered the room. She rose hastily, even though she felt vexed with herself for doing so. Why should she not write? As a matter of fact she spent a considerable portion of her time over these letters. Sometimes she would resolutely put pen and paper away, and set to work to sew every possible button on John's under-garments, or perform some other virtuous domestic duty, only to find when all was done that leisure still stared her in the face. For the leisure of a long hot-weather day in an out-

station may be compared to that of a solitary cell. Their nearest neighbours were twenty miles away, and Belle's experiment of having her youngest and most good-natured step-sister on a visit had ended in disastrous failure. The girl had cried for three days consecutively out of sheer low spirits. It was all very well, she said plaintively, when one was married and got something by it; but what was the use of being miserable before there was any necessity for it, and when one couldn't even scold the servants to amuse one's self? By and by, when Charlie Allsop got his step, she would no doubt have to put up with jungle life for a time; but now her dearest Belle must excuse her. Maud had written *such* a description of the dress she was going to wear at the Masonic ball; and really, now that Mabel was married to her widower, and Charlie's schooling paid for by John, they got on splendidly in the little house. Why shouldn't Belle go back to Missouri with her, and take rooms at Scott's Hotel? They would have such fun! But, though her husband gave her full leave to do as she liked, Belle shook her head over this tempting offer. She felt that she could not afford to neglect the tithes of mint and cummin, the jots and tittles of the law; she must at any rate make offering of what she had to give. So she stayed at home, and blushed violently when she rose from her desk.

"Writing to Marsden?" said John carelessly. "I thought you might be, and I wanted you just to give him a hint or two about the business. It would come naturally from you and save surprise. The fact is, there has been a lot of unforeseen expense; then the firm in Calcutta to which I sent my first batch of stuff has failed. Altogether I sha'n't be able to spare any interest on the money this year."

"No interest?" Belle could only echo his words stupidly, for the very idea of such a contingency had never entered her head, and the fact seemed to bring back all the old sickening dislike to the situation.

"Well!" He looked at her with the expression of distasteful patience which always came to his face when awaiting a remonstrance. But none followed. She was so absorbed in the fresh shame, to her, of this failure, that she could think of nothing else.

"Of course it is a pity," he went on, somewhat mollified by her silence, "but Marsden isn't a fool. He knows one has generally to wait for a return; indeed I consider it lucky we have not to borrow. I wish you wouldn't look so tragic over it, Belle. We are not ruined; far from it. Only for the present we have to live on our capital."

Belle's face brightened. "Could we not pay the interest out of capital, too, John?"

Her husband burst out laughing as he threw him-

self into an easy chair. "Upon my soul, for utter incapacity to understand even the morals of business, commend me to a really good woman! Interest out of capital! We are not a swindling company, Belle!"

"We might pay it out of your own savings, John," she urged, knowing how hopeless it would be to argue.

"Transference from one budget-head to another, and consequent cooking of accounts! No, my dear; I left that system of book-keeping behind me when I quitted Government service. Marsden must go without his interest for the present; he has very good pay, and the loss is quite temporary. In any circumstances the returns would have been unfavourable for this year, owing to the drought. Why, even with the aid of the dam I have scarcely had enough water for a quarter of the acreage I intend to have next season."

His voice tailed off into indifference as his attention became concentrated in a paper he had taken up, and there was an end of the matter so far as he was concerned.

Pens, ink and paper had lost their attraction for Belle that day, and for many days after; indeed, it was not until the knowledge that her long silence would cause anxiety, that she faced the task of finishing her letter to Major Marsden. The very certainty that he would care little for the absence of the

promised dividend, and be quite ready to accept her husband's views on the matter, made it seem all the more hard for her; and though she determined to leave the proper person to tell the unwelcome news, she found herself hampered on all sides by her own knowledge. Even remarks on the dryness of the weather savoured of an attempt at excuse, and for the first time she felt glad to write her signature at the bottom of the page. When it was done she leant her head over her crossed arms in a sudden rush of weariness, and thought how different it would have been if she could have met Philip on equal terms; if they could have told each other the truth in all things. Theoretically it was all very well to say that the money had nothing to do with the position, but practically she could not get rid of the conviction that she and John were preying on a man's sense of honour, or, worse, on his affections. It was no use telling herself she was despicable in having such thoughts; that, setting love aside, friendship itself excluded the question of give or take. As a matter of fact Philip did give her all he had, and he took, — what did he not take? She cowered before that, the worst question of all. She could not escape from the haunting sense of wrong which seemed to sap the strength of her self-respect; and back through all her heart-burnings came the one foolish fancy that if she could only have met Philip with the money,

or even a decent five per cent. interest on it, in her hand, she could have looked into his face with clear unshadowed eyes. And now! How was she to meet him when there was not even a dividend?

Philip meanwhile was undergoing no qualms; on the contrary, he was having a very good time. To begin with he was in command of the regiment and drawing, as John Raby said, excellent pay. Furthermore he was enjoying, as was inevitable, the return to health and life after eighteen months of death to all pleasure. Lastly, his conscience was absolutely at rest in regard to Belle. He would have been more, or less, than human had he not been aware that he had behaved as well as a man could, in very trying circumstances. In fact he was a little complacent over what had been, so far, a very simple and easy solution of a problem which other people held to be insoluble. He sent Belle the last new books, and wrote her kind brotherly letters, and thought of her as the best friend he had, and always with the same underlying consciousness of pure virtue. He forgot, however, that poor Belle stood in a very different position; one in which calm peace was well-nigh impossible. So as her letters became less frequent and less frank, he began to puzzle somewhat captiously over the cause. Finally he hinted at an explanation, and receiving nothing but jesting replies, he took ten days' leave and went

down to Saudaghur, ostensibly to settle the half yearly accounts; for both John and he found a sort of solemn refuge from the truth in the observance, so far as was possible, of strict business relations.

It gave him quite a shock to find how much change his few months' absence had wrought. The bare deserted house where Belle had nursed him back to life, and where he and she had spent so many days forgetful of the work-a-day world, content in a kindly constant companionship, was now a luxurious house hedged about by conventionalities. The drawing-room, where his sofa had reigned supreme, was full of *bric-à-brac* tables and heaven knows what obstacles, through which a man had to thread his way like a performing ape. Belle herself, despite her kind face and soft voice, was no longer the caretaker full of sympathy. She was his hostess, his friend, but also another man's wife; a fact of which she took care to remind him by saying she was glad he had come in time to celebrate the anniversary of her wedding-day on the morrow. Despite his theories Philip did not like the change. It vexed him, too, that she should look pale and worried when he had really done all, all that an honest man could do, to smooth her path. Had he not even kept away for five whole months? So he was decidedly out of humour when, coming from a long spell of business with John in the office, he found her alone for the

first time. She was standing by the fireplace in the drawing-room, and he made his way towards her intent on words. But she forestalled him. "Well! he has told you about it, I suppose,— that there is no dividend?" she said defiantly; and as she spoke she crushed the withered roses she had been removing from a vase and flung them on to the smouldering embers.

He looked at her in surprise. "I scarcely expected one. Oh, Belle!" he continued hotly, "is it that? Did you think, could you think I would care?"

She gave a little hard laugh. "How stupid you are! Of course you don't mind. Can't you see it is that,— which hurts? Can't you understand it is that,—your kindness,—which must hurt,— always?"

The dead leaves had caught fire and flamed up, throwing a glare of light on both their faces. It seemed to light up their hearts also. Perhaps she had not meant to say so much; yet now that she had said it she stood gracefully upright, looking him in the eyes, reckless, ready for anything. The sight of her brought home to Philip what he had forgotten before; that in this problem of his he had not to do with one factor but with two, and one of them a woman. Not a passionate one it is true, but a woman to whom sentiment and emotion were more than reason; a woman whose very innocence left her confused and helpless, uncertain of her own foot-

hold, and unable to draw the hard-and-fast line between good and evil without which she felt lost in a wilderness of wrong. The recognition startled him, but at the same time aroused his combativeness.

"I confess I don't see why it should," he said rather coldly. "Surely I have a perfect right to set, — other things before money, and it is wrong — "

"Shall I give you a copy-book so that you may write the sentiment down for future reference, Philip?" she interrupted swiftly. "Copy-book maxims about right and wrong are so useful when one has lost the way, aren't they? For myself I am tired of them, — dead tired, — dead tired of everything." And once again with a gesture of utter weariness she leant against the mantelpiece, her head upon her crossed arms.

His hands clenched as if to hold something tighter; something that seemed slipping from him. "I am sorry," he said huskily. "Is it my fault?"

She flamed round upon him. "Yes! it is your fault! All your fault! Why did you ever leave me that money?"

The truth, and the unfairness of her words, bit deep. "It was 'Why did you come back to take it away?' when we first met," he retorted in rising anger. "I told you then I had a right to live if *I* chose. I tell you now I will take the money back if

you choose. I will do it to-day if you like. It is only lent, I can give notice."

"What difference will it make now?" she went on recklessly. "Will it undo the mischief? Your legacy did it all. It made John —" She broke off suddenly, a look of terror came to her eyes, and she turned away.

"Well! I am waiting to hear. It made John —?"

"Nothing," she said in a low voice. "What is the good? It is all past."

"But I have a right to know; I will know. Belle, what wrong did my legacy do you? What wrong of which I know nothing? Let me see your face — I must see it —" He bent over her, almost rough in his impatience at the fine filmy threads of overwrought feeling which, seeming so petty to a man, yet have the knack of tying him hand and foot. What did she mean? Though they had never talked of such things, the fact that her legacy had decided John's choice could be no novelty, even to her. A woman who had money must always know it would enhance her other charms. Then suddenly a hitherto unappreciated fact recurred to him — if this was her wedding-day, she must have been married very soon — the memory of a marble summer-house in a peach garden, with his will on the table and John standing by, flashed upon him, making the passionate blood

leap up in resentment. "Belle!" he cried imperiously, "did he — did you know? Have you known —?" He paused, his anger yielding to pain. Had she known this incredible baseness all these weary months, those months during which he had been priding himself on his own forbearance? And she had said nothing! Yet she was right; for if once this thing were made clear between them what barrier would remain? Why should they guard the honour of a man who had himself betrayed it? In the silence which ensued it was lucky for them both that the room was full of memories of her kind touch, soothing his restless pain; so the desire to give something back in kind came uppermost.

"Is there nothing I can do?" he said at last, moving aside and standing square and steady. "Nothing I can say or do to make it easier for you?"

"If you could forget — "

He shook his head. "I will go away if you like, though I don't see why I should."

"Then it would only be giving up one thing more to please me," she answered with a little sad smile. "Why should you give up anything, when I can give — nothing! Ah, Philip, Philip! If you had only taken poor Dick's will and were free to go,— if you chose."

He frowned moodily. "I should not choose, so it would make no difference; except that you think

there would be one. I cannot see it. As for the will, I'm afraid it is hopeless; but if you like I can take leave and try. Afzul might come with me."

"If I like!" she echoed in despair. "If I like! It always comes back to that."

The slow tears overflowing her tired eyes cut him to the quick, though in sober truth he thought them needless. "It must,—seeing that I love you. Why should you shrink from the truth, Belle? Great Heavens! what have you or I done that we should be ashamed of ourselves?"

"Don't let's speak of it, Philip," she cried in a sort of terror. "It is all my fault, I know; but I cannot help it. It is no use saying I am wrong: everything is wrong from beginning to end."

And though he fretted and fumed, argued and appealed, nothing he could say sufficed to re-assure her. Rightly or wrongly she could not view the situation as he viewed it. She was galled and chafed on every side; nor could he fail to see during the next four days that his presence only brought her additional misery. She seemed unable to take anything naturally, and she shrank equally from seeming to avoid being alone with him, or from being alone. Yet, with true womanly inconsequence, she shrank most of all when he told her that he had made up his mind to go, and not to return until she sent for him. They were walking up and down the

new dam, which curved across a bend in the sandy reach, waiting for her husband who with Afzul and his gang of bandits was busy seeing to a strengthening of the side nearest the river. A red sun was setting over the jagged purple shadow of the Suleiman Hills, and flaring on the still pools of water below the embankment.

"I am driving you away," she said despondently. "You cannot even look after your own business because of me."

Then his patience gave way. "Damn the business!" he cried heartily, and walked along beside her kicking the little clods from his path before turning to her apologetically. "I beg your pardon, Belle, but it *is* a little trying. Let us hope the business will be successfully dammed, and then, according to John, I shall get my money back in two years. So cheer up; freedom is beneath your feet!"

Just below them, measuring up earthwork, stood John Raby and Afzul Khân. As they passed the latter looked up, *salaaming* with broad grins. "I wonder if he will take her away soon," was his thought. "I wish he would; then I could get rid of the paper and be off home by summer with Raby *sahib's* rupees in my pocket. What is he waiting for? She likes him, and Raby *sahib* would be quite content with the money."

John looked up too, and nodded. "Don't wait

for me, good people. I have to go over to the further end. You needn't keep tea for me, Belle, I prefer a whiskey-peg. Ta, ta!"

And as they moved off, their figures showing dark against the red sky, he looked after them, saying to himself that the Major could not complain. One way and another he got his money's worth.

"Your husband works too hard, Belle," said Philip. "You should persuade him to take it easier."

"He is so anxious to make it a success," she replied quickly.

"So are we all," retorted Philip cynically. "We ought to manage it between us, somehow."

As they passed the coolies' huts a big strapping woman with her face hidden in her veil came out and *salaamed*.

"Who is that?" asked Philip at once. The last few days had brought him a curious dissatisfaction with Belle's surroundings. Despite the luxurious home she seemed out of keeping with Afzul and his bandits, the tag-rag and bobtail of squalid coolies swarming about the place, and the stolid indifference of the peasants beyond the factory.

"A *protégée* of John's. He got her out of trouble somewhere. He says he has the biggest lot of miscreants on the frontier on his works. They don't look much, I must allow; but this woman seems to

like me. She has such a jolly baby. I had to doctor it last week. How's Nuttu to-day, Kirpo?"

The woman, grinning, opened her veil and displayed a sleeping child.

"Isn't he pretty, Philip?" said Belle softly. "And see, they have pierced his nose and ears like a girl's."

"For luck, I suppose. May God spare him to manhood," prefaced Philip piously, in native fashion before he asked the mother if it were not so.

She shook her head. "No, Protector of the poor! All my boys are healthy. He is called Nuttu, so that as he thrives some one else of the same name may dwindle and pine. That is why." She hugged the baby to her with an odd smile.

"She could not have meant that there was really another child whose death she desired," said Belle as they went on.

"I would not answer for it if I were you. They are a queer people. By Jove! How that woman does hate some one; I'm glad it isn't you, Belle!"

And Kirpo looking after them was saying in her turn that they were very queer people. If he was her lover why did the *mem* look so unhappy? The *sahib logue* did not cut off their wives' noses, or put them in prison; so what did it matter?

Truly those two were compassed about by a strange cloud of witnesses as they strolled homewards. Per-

haps the civilised world would have judged them as harshly. But no tribunal, human or divine, could have judged Belle more harshly than she did herself; and herein lay all the trouble. She could not accept facts and make the best of them.

John Raby coming in later found the two reading solemnly, one on either side of the fire, and told them they were horribly unsociable. "I couldn't get away before," he said. "Afzul wanted a day's leave and I had to measure up before he started."

"Has he gone already? I'm sorry," remarked Philip. "I wished to see him before I leave to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" John Raby looked from one to another. "Have you been quarrelling?"

And poor Belle, with the necessity for derisive denial before her, felt more than ever that she was on the broad path leading to destruction.

"I am sorry I have to go," said Philip with perfect truth; "but I really am of no use here."

CHAPTER XXII.

Could Philip Marsden have seen into Mahomed Lateef's old tower about the time he was leaving Nilgunj his regrets might have had a still more truthful ring, and Belle might have been saved from once more adding to the difficulties of her own lot, and, as it were, making a stumbling-block of her own good intentions. For in that case, Major Marsden would have stopped another day in order to see his old friend, and in the course of conversation would have heard things which might have changed the current of subsequent events; but Fate decreed otherwise.

More than once, seeing the daily increasing poverty of his patron, Afzul Khân had suggested an appeal to the Major, as one sure to do something for the father of the man who had stood between him and death; but the stubborn old malcontent had lumped the whole Western creation in his category of ingrates. "The past is past," he would say angrily. "I will not even ask justice from one of them. And, according to thy tales, Marsden *sahib* has taken to trade and leagued himself with Raby, who is no better than a *buniah*,— no better than Shunker

Bahâdur, whom God smite to hell! Hast heard what they are doing down yonder? Pera Ditta was here last week, saying his land was to be sold because he could not pay. And how could he pay when water never came? And how could water come when strangers enter and build dams without let or hindrance?"

Afzul frowned. "True, father, and 'tis about that dam I would have you speak. Not, look you, that it did harm this year. 'Twas God's fault, not Raby's, that the river failed, though folk will not have it so. And next year, even, the dam will do good, not harm, if a sluice be put in it such as they have north in the big canals. Look you, Raby is no fool. Before Allah! he is wise; and he offered to put one, so that the water would run every year right away to the south, if the people would promise him to grow indigo, and dig part of the channel. But Shunker, or God knows who, hath stuffed their ears, and they will not listen. So Raby means the pig-headed fools shall learn reason. I blame him not, but that is no cause why you should starve; and starve you must if the river does not come."

"I will starve sooner than beg."

"And the child?"

That was an argument which invariably brought the discussion to a close in vehement objections to interference, and loud-voiced assertions of indepen-

dence. Nevertheless, Afzul returned to the charge again and again, moved to insistence by a personal desire to be free from the necessity of eking out the expenses of the household. He gave cheerfully enough to the women, on the sly lest the old martinet should wring his neck for the impertinence; but for all that he wanted to be free to go his own ways when summer came. If the sluice were made and a constant supply of water insured, the old man and the women would at least escape starvation. John Raby, who had found the Pathan singularly intelligent and with some knowledge of levelling (learnt from poor Dick), had so far given him confidence that he knew what ought to be done; but he was not well enough up in the whole matter to understand that his master had considerable excuse for refusing to do it. As a matter of fact the dam had been constructed with great care so as to avoid cutting off the water supply from the neighbouring villages, where the floods came with fair regularity. John Raby had even spent money in improving their chances, on certain conditions about indigo, which he well knew would eventually be of enormous benefit to the people themselves. In regard to those further afield he had made a very fair proposal, which, mainly owing to Shunker's machinations, they had rejected; briefly, he had offered a constant supply of water at the price of a little labour and a few rea-

sonable concessions. When they refused his terms, he smiled and went on building his dam. Up to a certain flood-point he knew it would be an obstruction; beyond that, the river would still find its way. He only enlarged the cycle of floodless years; but on this fact he counted for eventual submission. As for the owners of the few small holdings between the dam and the basin of alluvial soil tilled by these pig-headed Hindus, he was sorry for them; but as it was quite impossible for him to ensure a water-supply without giving it beyond, their best plan would be to exert their influence towards a reasonable solution of the difficulty. In a matter like this he was not a man to swerve a hair's breadth from his own plan for the sake of anybody. He conceived that he had a perfect right to do as he chose, and if others disputed his action they could go to law about it; only, long before the vexed question of the frequency of flood in past years could be decided one way or the other, he felt certain that the sight of the surrounding prosperity would have overcome all opposition.

Afzul Khân, however, only half in the secret, believed that the sluice-gate might be made by an appeal to Major Marsden; and, when the latter came to the factory, took a day's leave on purpose to rouse the old Khân to action, it being quite hopeless to expect him to ask a favour of John Raby, of

whom he never spoke save with a gibe. Perhaps the thought of seeing a familiar face influenced the old man, for when the argument reached its usual climax of, "And the child, Khân *sahib*, what of the child?" he gave a fierce sigh, and pressing the boy, who was sitting on his knee, closer to his heart, muttered impatiently, "What is the pride of a man before the hunger of a child? I will go; so hold thy devil of a tongue, and let us have peace!"

Afterwards, however, when Afzul with solemn satisfaction at his victory was polishing up the old warrior's sword, Mahomed Lateef became restive again. "I know not that I will go. He owes me somewhat, 'tis true, and in past time I thought him just; but I like not this talk of trade; 'tis not a soldier's task."

The Pathan leaning over the shining blade breathed on it to test its lustre. "*Wah!* Khân *sahib*, all's fair in love and war. Men do much for the sake of a woman without tarnishing their honour longer than my breath lingers on good steel. Marsden *sahib* did it for love of the *mem*, look you."

The old man scowled. "I like not that either. Let him choose the one or the other, and use his sword to keep his choice."

Afzul smiled cunningly. "Wait a while, Khân *sahib*, wait a while; the fowler must have time to lure his bird, and some women have cold hearts."

"She hath a heart of ice! Yea! I will go, Afzul, and I will tell him of Murghub Ahmad and how she bore false witness."

"Not so! Thou wilt ask for water, and get thy revenge safe in thy pocket; it lies heavy on an empty stomach."

So they borrowed a pink-nosed pony from the pleader's father in the next village, and with his little grandson, arrayed in huge turban and tarnished tinsel coatee, disposed in front of the high-peaked saddle, Khân Mahomed Lateef Khân set off to see the Major and plead the child's cause. A picturesque group they made, as they passed along the sandy ways and treeless stretches of hard sun-baked soil; Afzul leading the pony, the boy laughing and clapping his hands at the novelty, the old soldier's white beard showing whiter than ever against the child's dark curls, Fâtma and Haiyât standing outside, recklessly unveiled, to shriek parting blessings and injunctions. And lo! after all these preparations, after all this screwing up of courage and letting down of pride, the Major had gone! Afzul could scarcely believe his ears. Gone! and he had been reckoning on giving certain hints about Dick's will which might have served to bring matters to a crisis. He returned to the hut where he had left the Khân and his grandson while he went to arrange for an interview, and tried to persuade Mahomed Lateef

not to allow his journey to go for nothing, but to prefer his request to Raby *sahib* himself. He might even write a petition, and demand that it should be sent on to the Major, if pride forbade asking a favour of the former. Afzul might as well have urged the old man to wear patent-leather shoes or perform any other such abomination of desolation. "Am I a baboo that I should cringe and beg?" he answered, wrathfully. "The Major is a soldier and knows what it means to stave a blow from a comrade's head; 'tis but defending your own in the future. But this man! He would talk of rupees, and I have none to give. Let it be, fool! I will stop the night here as was arranged, since the child seems tired. To-morrow we can return. I am not so far through that a day's journey will kill me."

So, from the recesses of the windowless shanty, he watched John Raby passing back to the house when the day's work was done; then he went forth in the twilight and prowled about the new factory, noting the unmistakable signs of masterful energy with a curious mixture of admiration and contempt. "As thou sayest he is a man, and no mere money-bag like Shunker," was his final comment. "Come, little one, say thy evening petition and let me roll thee in thy quilt, for thine eyes are heavy."

The child, already half asleep, slid from his grandfather's knee, and standing, stretched his little hands

skywards. "God bring justice to those who brought my father injustice," he murmured drowsily.

A savage exultation came to the old face looking down on the curves and dimples. "*Ameen, ameen!* Justice! That is all we seek. Come, light of mine eyes, and God give thee many wakenings."

Thereafter the two men sat silent, waiting for sleep to come to the child. And it came, but not for long. Perhaps in less careful hands the boy had taken chill, perhaps Afzul's more sumptuous fare was the exciting cause; anyhow, a few hours afterwards Kirpo, roused by the helpless men from the death-like slumber of the domesticated savage, found little Hussan Ahmad struggling for breath in his grandfather's arms, a prey to spasmodic croup. Of course she had not the remotest idea what was the matter, or what was to be done. She could but take the child to her capacious bosom and add to the general alarm by shrill sympathy. It was a fit — the dear one would die — *Hai, hai!* — some one had bewitched it. Then suddenly an inspiration seized her. The *mem!* let them send for the *mem!* But last week her own boy had had the gripes until the *mem* came with a little bottle and cured him. *Hai, hai!* the darling was choking! Send for the *mem*, if they would not have him die before their eyes.

Afzul looked at the grandfather interrogatively. Pride, fear, resentment, and love fought hard for the

mastery. "She will not come; she hath a heart of ice," quavered the old voice, seeking for excuse, and escape from responsibility.

"Who can count on a woman? but death is sure; and she is wise in such ways, I know. Say, Khân *sahib*, shall I go?"

There was an instant's pause, broken by the child's hoarse crow. Then the faith of a life-time spoke. "Go! It is Kismet. Give her the chance; it is God's will to give it. She may not come, and then —"

But ten minutes after Belle Raby in her soft white evening dress had the struggling child in her arms and reassuring words on her lips. Afzul Khân, too, held a bottle and a teaspoon, whereat Kirpo's face broadened to content. "Have no fear, master," she whispered in the old man's ear; "'tis the same one, I swear it. A charm, a potent charm!"

Most Englishwomen in India gain some knowledge of doctoring, not only from necessity, but from the neighbourliness which turns them into nurses where in England they would be content with kind inquiries; and, though croup is comparatively rare among the native children, Belle had seen it treated among English ones. Such knowledge, a medicine-chest, and common sense seem, and indeed often act, like magic to the ignorant eyes helplessly watching

their loved ones fight for life. The old Mohammedan stood aside, bolt upright as if on parade, a prey to dull regrets and keen joy as Belle's kind voice conjured up endless things beyond the thought or comprehension even of the child's mother, had she been there. Hot water, a bath fetched from somewhere in the dark beyond the feeble glimmer of light in which those bare white arms gleamed about the child's brown body, ice, a soft white blanket, within the folds of which peace seemed to come to the struggling limbs till sleep actually claimed the child again.

"He is all right now," said Belle smiling. "Keep him in your arms, Kirpo, and give him plenty of air. I will come to-morrow and see him again. Afzul, have you the lantern?"

She stood — a strange figure in that mud-floored, mud-roofed hovel — fastening the silver clasp of her fur cloak with slim fingers sparkling with jewels; a figure more suitable to some gay gathering on the other side of the world. Then from the darkness into the ring of light where she stood stepped another figure. A tall old man, made taller by the high-twined green turban proclaiming him a past pilgrim to the great shrine of warriors, a man with his son's medals on a threadbare velvet coat, and a sharp curved sword held like a sacrament in his outstretched palms. "*Huzoor!*" he said bowing

his proud old head. All the conflicting emotions of the past hour had concentrated themselves to this. Words, either of gratitude or blame, were beyond him. God knows which, given opportunity of calm thought, he might have offered. But so, taken by surprise, carried beyond his own personal interests by admiration, he gave, in the true old fighting instinct which dies hard amongst the Mohammedans, his allegiance to what was brave and capable. "*Huzoor!*"

The English girl had learnt enough of native customs to know her part. Those slim white fingers lingered an instant on the cold steel, and her bright eyes smiled up into the old man's face. "The gift is not mine, but yours." Perhaps it was; the faculty of just admiration is a great possession.

She found her husband still smoking cigarettes over a French novel. "By George! Belle," he said, "you look awfully nice. That sort of thing suits you down to the ground. You were born to be a Lady Bountiful, and send social problems to sleep with sentiment. By the way, do you know who the little beggar is? I asked the *khansaman;* he is the son of that man Murghub Ahmad who was transported! His grandfather is living on the ancestral estate about ten miles down the old *nullah.* I'm precious glad Marsden didn't find him out, or he would have been bothering me to do something for

the old fellow. And I haven't time just now for charity. I leave that to you, my dear; it suits you — as I remarked just now — down to the ground."

Belle, who had turned very pale, said nothing, but she seemed to feel the chill of the cold steel at her finger-tips. She understood better what that offering had meant, and, sentiment or no sentiment, something rose in her throat and kept her silent. Next morning, according to promise, she went over to the huts again. The dew shone on the flowers as she crossed the garden, an indescribable freshness was in the air. The child, but newly aroused from a sweet sleep, was still surrounded by the white blanket in the midst of which he sat cuddled up, rubbing his eyes and yawning. Afzul was smiling at the door, the grandfather, calmed into stern politeness, standing by the bed.

"Rise, O Hussan Ahmad!" he said to the child after a few words of inquiry and reply. "Rise and say thy thanks to the *mem* for her kindness. They are due; they are justly due."

Still drowsy, and mindful only of an accustomed order, the boy stretched his chubby little arms skyward. "May God bring justice to those who brought injustice to my father."

Khân Mahomed Lateef Khân started as if he had been shot, and his right hand fell sharply on the child's shoulder, then wandered to his sword-hilt.

"It is Fate," he muttered gloomily. "Out of his own mouth I am rebuked."

Belle's heart gave a great throb of anger and pain. She had lain awake piecing the stray threads of the story together till it had seemed to her a sad yet beautiful pattern on the web of life, and now — "Why do you say that?" she asked gently of the child, as if he were the only person present.

He looked at her fearlessly. "I say it morning and evening. Listen! May God bring justice to those who brought injustice to my father."

The eyes of those two men watching her were like spurs to her high spirit. "Listen," she said. "I will say it too. May God bring justice to those who brought injustice to your father."

The eyes fell as she passed out without another word. "By the God who made me," swore the old soldier, "she is a brave one, and she hath my sword! Remember that, Afzul. If the time should ever come, my sword at least is for her and hers. For the rest, the child has spoken."

Afzul smiled grimly. He was beginning to see what those two brave ones fancied in the pale-faced *mem.* She was too good for Raby *sahib* with his rupees, he decided; yet women are always influenced by wealth. Perhaps the thought of what she would leave behind hindered her from following the Major. If so, a little reverse in the business might be bene-

ficial. Anyhow, and come what may, he must get rid of that cursed blue envelope ere summer opened the passes for homesick footsteps. Even if he had to leave it behind him unconditionally, he must do so, since by that time he would have money saved to last for an idle year or two.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Some ten days after this John Raby came from the office into the drawing-room with a letter in his hand and vexation on his face. "Upon my word, Belle," he began, "you have a most unfortunate turn for philanthropy, as I always told you. I've no doubt your doctoring that little croupy imp suggested the idea that we were made up of benevolence. Sentiment, my dear child, is the devil in business."

"What is it now, John?" she asked, with an effort at lightness. For all that, her tone made him raise his eyebrows impatiently. There is no accounting for the jar which comes at times between two natures, especially when circumstances are emphasising their respective individualities. This was the case between Belle and her husband; her conscientiousness being hyper-sensitised by constant self-blame, and his being dulled by the keen desire to triumph over all opposition.

"Only that bankrupt old warrior appealing through Marsden to the firm for an annual supply of water from my dam. A cool request, isn't it? And Marsden, of course, being sentimental as you are,

hopes it will be done. All I can say is, that it is lucky he and you have me to look after your interests."

"But if it could be done — "

"My dear child, don't you think I'd have done it had the thing been possible without detriment to us? I don't suppose Marsden thought of it in that light, but he ought to have done so. I have my faults no doubt, but I'm not an ogre."

"I wish it had been possible!"

"So do I; but it isn't. Therefore, if you don't mind, I hope you will refrain from arousing Philip's benevolence more than you can help. I mean by allusions to the old man and the child. They are a most picturesque couple, of course, but if sentiment is to come in, I may as well throw up the whole business. For mind you, Belle, it is just as well you should know that the factory is bound to be unpopular at first."

"Unpopular! Why?" asked Belle in surprise. "I thought you said it would improve the condition of the people immensely."

"After a time. However it is no use discussing it; I shall write to Marsden and say, — well, I shall say, chiefly, that I also am filled with pious and benevolent intentions, but that I desire a free hand. Meanwhile, as I see from Philip's letter that Afzul has been priming you with pity which you have

been handing on, I wish you wouldn't. Give the old man as much money as you like, of course; but don't egg my partner on to socialism, there's a good girl." He looked very bright and handsome as he bent over and kissed her. "Do you know, Belle," he said, laughingly, "you are the most transparent fraud in creation. I believe you set the old man on to Marsden; now didn't you?"

She flushed scarlet. "I only told Afzul when he was speaking of it that the best way was to write a petition. And Philip was an old friend."

"Just so; but we don't want old friends, or new ones either, to interfere. I'm manager of this factory, and I intend to manage it my own way."

"Do you mean without consulting Philip's wishes?"

He turned round on her sharply as he was leaving the room. "That is about it. He knows nothing of business, and should be glad to have some one to act for him who does."

There was, as usual, so much sound common sense in her husband's words that Belle tried to crush down the dissatisfaction she could not help feeling at the idea of Philip being made responsible for actions of which he might know nothing. After all, had it really come to this, that she did not trust her husband to behave uprightly? The thought was poison to all peace, and she thrust

it aside in horror at its very appearance. Yet a new element of trouble had entered into life and she found herself, quite unconsciously, keeping ears and eyes open for things which she had previously ignored. This did not escape her husband's keen sight, and in his light, half-serious way he rallied her on this newly-developed interest in the business. The fact was they were beginning to understand each other too well; and now and again a tone came into John's voice which sent the blood to her heart in a throb of fear and made her grovel, positively grovel, before her ideal of wifely duty. Then her husband would recover his careless good-nature, and the household run so smoothly that even Belle's high-strung nerves scarcely felt a jolt.

So the spring came, bringing to the garden a rush of blossom well-nigh impossible of description to those accustomed to slow northern lands. Belle could have picked clothes-baskets full of Maréchal Niel roses from the bushes and yet have left them burdened with great yellow cups. The pomegranates glowed with a scarlet positively dazzling to the eyes; the gardenias were all too strongly scented; the bees and butterflies drugged themselves with honey from the wild tangle of overgrown, overblown annuals which, forgetting their trim English habit, usurped the very paths by thickets of mignonette, sweet pea, dianthus, and

a host of other familiar flowers. Belle, walking round her domain in the early morning when the nightly gift of dew still lay on the leaves, used to wonder how serpents could creep into such a paradise. The very isolation of the life had an irresistible charm. What was the use of worrying about ideas? Where was the good of fretting over the mischances of that world which lay beyond this calm retreat?

Suddenly, however, that world asserted its existence. She had still kept up her habit of morning rides, and though her husband was now up with the dawn, he was far too much absorbed in his work to accompany her save when business sent him beyond his own boundaries. Even then she began to notice his excuses for escaping her companionship, and when in her drowsy content she went so far as to express a half-jesting remonstrance, he would reply in the same tone, that he had no intention of slaving forever; and that this was his working day. By and by, when he had turned Marsden adrift, and could have the whole thing to himself, — why, he meant to have it and enjoy it. Meanwhile it was much pleasanter for her to ride along the river bank and through the inundation lands, than in the dust southwards where his business took him so often. But this level expanse of bare fruitless soil had an attraction for

Belle; and one day, losing her way on it, she made for the landmark of a village on the horizon, and thus found herself considerably beyond her usual distance from home. It was a village with poverty and sloth written on the blistered, rain-marked, mud walls, and in the absence of fuel-heaps and thorn-enclosures. A sorry forsaken spot it was, despite the swarm of low-bred-looking brats who came out to stare at her as she rode at a foot's pace through the widest lane. A woman stood slouching at the entrance to a courtyard, and Belle, pausing, asked her the way to Nilgunj. The scowl on the face raised to hers startled her, so did the words. "Are you Raby's *mem?*"

Her answering assent met a rude reception in the curt recommendation to find the way herself, accompanied by a sudden closing of the door. Then came a shrill clamour of voices from within, and one by one, over the alley walls, dark disapproving faces full of angry curiosity. The display of hostility might have gone no further if her horse, restive at being checked and, no doubt, disliking the crowd of children following close on its heels, had not sidled and backed, putting the young imps to hustling flight. This was naturally the signal for shrieks and abuse from the mothers, and though a a touch of the whip recalled her beast to duty, humanity was not so reasonable. A little raga-

muffin took up a piece of dirt and threw it after her; the others approved, and though fear of her horse's heels kept the little arms at a comparatively safe distance, Belle Raby had nevertheless to submit to the indignity of riding through the village pursued by pelting urchins, and by no means pleasant abuse from over the walls. Her indignation was greater than her fear or even than her surprise, and the scornful glance with which she met the angry eyes on a level with her own silenced more than one of the tongues. But for a sense that it would have been undignified, she would dearly have loved to dismount, seize one of the ringleaders, and administer summary justice. The possible meaning of this unusual reception did not strike her until, emerging from the village still pursued by her tormentors, she came straight upon her husband. His look, as he recognised the position, filled her with alarm; and there was something in it of such absolutely uncontrolled passion and hatred, that it flashed upon her that he, at least, must have good reason to understand the scene. "John! don't do anything, please don't!" she cried as he threw himself from his horse. "They are only children."

"I'm not going to run after those little demons, if you mean that," he replied, giving her the reins of his mount to hold; "but they have parents, I suppose. I'll be back in a moment. Don't be

afraid, Belle; they are curs, every one of them. But they shall pay for this, in more ways than one."

He came out five minutes afterwards, followed by a protesting and most venerable looking pantaloon, representative of that past age in which a white face was, verily, a sign of kingship. He took no notice of the lavish appeals and apologies, but, putting his note-book in his pocket, remounted. "I'm sorry you came this way," he said as they rode off; "but, as I often say, you have a faculty for getting into mischief which is surprising in such an eminently virtuous person as you are, Belle. However, you mustn't do it again. In fact I should prefer your keeping to my land for the next two or three months."

Belle, given time to think, had lost much of her courage in dismay at this most unexpected insight into the world beyond her gates. Could such a state of affairs be necessary? "Why, —" she began.

"My dear child, don't ask *me* why! I can't supply reason to these pig-headed brutes. And don't, for goodness' sake, make a fuss over it, and bring Marsden's soft-heartedness down on me just when I need to have a free hand. I told you I should be unpopular, and I am; that is the long and short of it; more unpopular than need be, for somehow the people have got an idea that I could

help if I chose. Why didn't Marsden put their appeals in the waste paper basket, as I do, instead of raising hopes by referring to me?"

"Has he been referring to you?"

Her husband looked at her and laughed. "I'm not going to give myself away in confidence. As I said before, I'm awfully sorry you came out this way and chanced on that village. It is the worst about here. For all that, there is no need for any anxiety, I assure you. Afzul and his bandits are worth a hundred of these curs; and once the people see I am a man of my word, they will come in sharp enough."

"But if Philip — "

"Bother Philip! He is a trump of course, but I think he has mixed himself up a little too much in this business. I shall be glad when he is out of it."

"Surely if you were to explain — "

"My dear Belle, explanation is nothing to demonstration. In six weeks' time, when the first flood comes, I shall prove myself right, and waltz in, hands down, an easy winner. That is to say if nobody fouls me now out of goodness, and righteousness, and all charitableness."

It was one thing to be told this, another to find comfort in it, and as the days passed Belle grew more and more uneasy. She felt sure all could not be fair and square; that there must be some antago-

nistic element at work to make the unpopularity so intense. Perhaps because she watched for it so keenly, it seemed to her that discontent showed itself more and more freely on the faces of the people she did meet in her now limited walks. One evening she had a bad five minutes listening to a row in the coolies' quarters with her husband's clear voice dominating the clamour. She was still pale when he came whistling through the garden as if nothing had happened. It was only, he said, a war of words between Kirpo and Afzul. There had always been a jealousy between them; the latter declaring that such a hideous female was not worthy to touch any man's bread, for the former had risen by favour from mere cooliedom, to act as cook for a gang of Hindu workers; the woman retorting that the hillmen were no better than pirates, ready, despite their professions of horror at meats prepared by idolaters, to steal her supplies if her back was turned. Afzul had of late been growing idle and uppish; so John had sided with Kirpo in this particular dispute.

"I think Kirpo is rather uppish too," replied Belle. "I heard her ordering some of the men about as if she was their mistress."

Her husband laughed easily. "Just like a native! The fact being that Kirpo is useful to me at present, by giving me information I can rely upon; and she presumes on the fact. When the floods have come

I shall be able to dispense with her, — with a variety of things, in fact. I shall not be sorry; I hate being beholden to people."

Belle bent her head over her work and sewed faster. "I don't like Afzul, I don't like Kirpo, and I like the unpopularity least of all. Oh, John, could you not give way a little? I am sure Philip — "

"Now look here, Belle, I said just now that I hated being beholden to any one, and you yourself made enough to-do when I borrowed this money from Marsden. And you've fussed and worried about it ever since, because you think he consented for your sake. Perhaps he did; and so I mean to show him he should have consented for his own. I call that a laudable ambition which should satisfy your pride. Now in my opinion the only road to success lies my way. That, I think, should settle the matter once and for all. Of course I am not infallible; but, unless something very unexpected turns up, you will be laughing at your own fears this time two months. Now, as I told Kirpo to come up to the office as soon as it was dark, let me get some peace and quiet first. I think Haydn would suit me to-day; there is no forced sentiment in him, jolly old chap!"

So Belle played Haydn, and John dozed in his chair till the darkness settled deep enough to hide

Kirpo as she stole through bye-paths to the office verandah. There, behind a creeper-hung pillar, she waited till John's tall figure showed itself at the writing-table. Then she went forward, and raising the bamboo *chick* said softly: "I am here, *Huzoor!*"

"All right! Come in and shut the door."

Some one hiding in the oleander bushes in full view of this incident muttered a curse, and settled himself down in a new position. So what Shunker had said was true, and, disfigured as she was, Kirpo still kept her hold on the *shaitan sahib*. But for a promise he had made to the usurer not to anticipate the great revenge brewing for John Raby's discomfiture, Râmu (for it was he, once more out of prison) would have asked nothing better than to have waited patiently till Kirpo appeared again, and then in the darkness to have fallen on her and killed her outright. As it was he sat with eyes fixed on the door, controlling his passion by the thought of future and less hazardous revenge upon them both. He had a long knife tucked away in his waistcloth, but it seemed to him as if he could feel its sharp edge and see its gleaming curve plunging into flesh. Truly a venomous, dangerous animal to be lurking among the white oleanders in Belle's paradise, as she sat playing Haydn, and John, with a contemptuous smile on his face, was listening to Kirpo's tales. She knew a good deal

did Kirpo, but not all. She did not know, for instance, that her husband lay among the oleanders, else she might have hesitated in playing the part of spy; though she was no coward, and her revengeful desires were keen.

By and by she came out, and a crouching, shadowy figure followed her through the garden, and then struck across the barren plain to the village which John Raby had described as the worst of the lot; the village of which Belle used persistently to dream; the village where even the children looked at her with eyes of hate. Her husband did not dream of anything. He used to sleep the sleep of the just, and wake fresh as a lark to the pursuit of the one reality in his life, — money. And even in its pursuit he was content, because it occupied him so thoroughly that he had no time to notice minor details. Sometimes Belle irritated him, but the instant after he would smile; it was a way women, especially good women, had, — they could not help it. Sometimes he fell foul in spirit of his senior partner, but not for long. What were such trivialities in comparison with the main fact of general success? Belle was a good wife, Marsden a good friend; above all, the concern was a good concern, a rattling good business; and he, John Raby, had plucked the plum out of Shunker's very hands. That last thought was always provocative of a smile.

Meanwhile the Lâlâ was smiling too. The reappearance of Râmu, — who seemed to keep all his virtue for the purpose of procuring a ticket-of-leave, — had considerably strengthened the usurer's hands by providing him with one absolutely reckless tool. When the time came for setting fire to the carefully laid train he would not have to seek for a match; and that, when one had to deal with these slow-brained peasants, was a great gain. With such a leader he looked forward confidently to mischief sooner or later. Kirpo might tell tales, but there were some tales Shunker meant to keep secret, till the right moment came for turning passive opposition into active interference.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Belle's paradise did not last long. In less than three weeks the hot winds came to shrivel the bursting buds and turn even the promise of blossom into a sign of death. The sunshine took a deeper yellow glow, the blue faded from the sky, an impalpable dust began to settle on all things. Down in the sand stretches below the house the net-work of the river grew finer day by day, and the mud-banks left by shrinking streams assumed airs of perpetuity by clothing themselves with green herbs, as if the time of floods were not nigh to swallow them up once more. All else, far and near, seemed fainting in a great thirst, longing for the crisis which was to bring them life.

But Belle, though the floods had not yet come, felt one calm still morning as if the waters had gone over her head, and she had no power to resist the current which swept her from her feet. It was a trivial thing which roused the feeling; only a word or two in one of Philip's letters which she held in her hand as she stood beside her husband's writing-table.

"I quite admit it, my dear girl," he was saying

calmly. "Marsden has written to me on that subject several times, and I have replied as I thought fit. It is quite possible I may have given him the impression I was willing, or even that I was going, to do more than has really been done. What then?"

"Only this," she replied hotly; "that you have degraded him in the eyes of these people. He promised inquiry and —"

"He had no business to promise anything. He referred it to me, and he has no right to complain of my decision."

"He does not complain! When has he ever complained?" she interrupted, trying hard to keep the passion from her voice. "You can read what he says, if you like. He thinks, — I do not ask how — that you have done your best."

"Exactly! I *have* done my best for the business."

"He did not mean that. Oh, John, the shame of it will kill me! To take everything from a man, even his honour and good name —"

"You don't appear to be so much concerned about mine. But I promised to pay Philip back his money in two years, and I mean to do it. Be reasonable, my dear child. Some one must take the responsibility; some one must take the odium which is unfortunately inseparable from success. Why should you complain because I take it cheerfully?"

Belle crushed the letter closer in vexed despair.

"I can never make you understand! Do you not see it is a question of right and wrong? You have taken his money and are using it as he would hate to have it used. You have, — I do not say deceived him — but kept the truth from him; and even if you succeed, what will you be doing but giving him money gained as he would have scorned to gain it?"

Her husband laughed a very ugly laugh, and for the first time his face showed some emotion. "I always knew you thought Marsden perfect, but I wasn't aware of your estimate of my comparative virtue. I cannot say I'm flattered by it."

"I can't help it," she said, almost with a sob. "I can't see things in the light you see them."

"That is a mutual disability, so for heaven's sake let us agree to differ. The thing is done. Even if I wished to do so, the sluice could not be built now. The river is due in three weeks, or sooner, and any interference with the dam at present must mean disaster to all concerned. I tell you this because I want you to understand that now, at any rate, my hands are tied."

"Perhaps, — I mean, no doubt; but he must be told, and — and given his choice. It is not right — "

"Tell him, my dear, if it pleases you to do so; though I think it is a pity, for in two months' time, if all this fuss doesn't play the devil with my plans,

the difficulties will be over. By the way, what do you propose to tell him? That I have behaved like a scoundrel?"

"You have no right to say such things, John!" she cried indignantly.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well! That I have behaved as he would have scorned to behave? &c., &c. It seems to me about the same thing in different words."

The flush which rose to her face told how hard she was hit. That was the mischief of it all! — that fatal comparison between these two men, against which she had struggled in vain. Why should she have compared them? Why, even now, should she not let things be and trust to John's superior wisdom? For he was wise in such matters, and, heaven knows! gave himself up wholly to insure success. How could she tell Philip? What was she to tell him? Yet he must know; even for John's sake he ought to know what was being done in his name. "I will ask him to come here," she said with an effort, "then he can see for himself."

John Raby looked up quickly. "Very well, do so. Only remember this: I disclaim all responsibility for what may happen, and I tell you fairly I mean to have my own way. You know perfectly well that I consider quarrelling mere waste of time; but if the position becomes awkward, that will be your doing, not mine."

"I will tell him to come," repeated Belle slowly.

"Then that's settled. Perhaps it may be best, after all," he added, his face losing its last trace of vexation. "Indeed I thought of asking him before; but the fact is the last time he was here you showed your uneasiness so distinctly that I hesitated."

Once more the colour rose to his wife's face as she turned away. Was everything from beginning to end her fault, she wondered, as she sent off a telegram asking Philip to come, if he could get leave. She chose a telegram more because it relieved her from the necessity of giving her reasons than from any desire to save time, and so accelerate the explanations she dreaded. Yet when, late in the evening of the next day, John, coming from the factory, told her with a certain elation in his voice, that the river was on the rise, she clasped her hands nervously and wished Philip had wings.

All the next day she found herself going to the verandah whence she could see the sandy flats, and wondering if those distant streaks of water were indeed creeping nearer.

"The barometer's falling fast, so I'm afraid your philanthropy comes a little too late, Belle," said John when he came in to lunch; "but personally I'm glad the floods will be early. I don't mind confessing to a little anxiety as to whether the dam will work, and it will be a relief to see you looking less worried. I

think every one is too much on the strain just now, even Afzul. He was only saved from throwing up his place this morning by the news that Philip was coming to-morrow; so you see your plan has done some good already."

The night closed dark and hazy, and Belle's last look from the verandah showed her nothing but dim distances stretching away to a lighter horizon. She could not sleep, yet she would not make any stir, so she lay awake wondering what forces were at work among the shadows, and what the dawn would bring forth.

"John, John!" she cried, touching his shoulder to rouse him when the first glimmer of light came to reveal the labour of the night. "The floods are out right up to the high bank!"

He was on his feet in an instant. "By George! I *am* in luck!" he cried. "It will take them all by surprise. Tell them to bring tea, Belle; I must be off to the dam at once. And don't expect me back till lunch; Marsden will excuse me, and besides," he gave a little light laugh, "it will give you leisure to get over your confession. It's awfully nice to have some one to be penitent in your place. It saves a lot of bother. Don't you remember Florac's reply to Pendennis about his mother's tears. 'You must have made her weep a good deal,' says Pen 'Mais enormément, mon cher!'"

A few minutes later he had left her with a kindly good-bye, and a recommendation to take things easy as he did. As she walked up and down the verandah waiting for Philip's arrival, she asked herself more than once whether it would not be wiser to follow John's advice. Now that the last chance of remedy was over for the present, why should she give herself the pain of acknowledging that she condemned her husband's action? Drifting this way and that in the current of thought, as many another thing swept from its moorings was drifting in the floods beneath her eyes, she had reached no certain conclusion when the even tread of the horse, which they had sent to meet Philip, brought her back to action with a strange dread of herself. He was beside her in an instant and though she had worded her telegram so as to avoid anxiety, it was clearly evident in his face.

"Well, what is it?" he said, still holding her outstretched hand of welcome, and looking into her face curiously.

"Nothing," she answered hurriedly; "nothing in the least important. Only — I wanted to see you. Come in; you must be tired, that beast has such rough paces; I would have sent Suleimân, but he is lame. Come in, tea is ready."

So she ran on, and Philip, who, to say sooth, had been on tenter-hooks ever since the receipt of her summons, had to fall into her mood, not without a

certain sense of injury. But the pleasure of being within touch of her hand and sight of her face was irresistible, so that the following hours seemed to take him back to the most perfect memory of his whole life, to that evening at Saudaghur which he and she had spent together in thoughtless, unreasoning content. Perhaps this memory cast its glamour over Belle likewise; certain it is that something beat down and overwhelmed all thought and care. John, coming in almost late for lunch, found them laughing over the last week's "Punch" which Philip had brought with him; and taking his cue quickly, if with some contemptuous surprise, dropped his serious air and became the genial host. Never was there a gayer or more light-hearted trio; but outside the house the clear promise of the morning had dulled to a yellow haze, and every now and again a swirl of dust swept past, making the yellow deeper.

"In for the first *andi*[1] of the season," said John Raby standing by the window. "The natives say it is a sign of a healthy year to have a dust-storm early. More good luck, you see, Belle! There is nothing like keeping a calm sough, and trusting to Providence. Doesn't it make you feel 'heavenly calm,' Marsden, to be here in this jolly room and know that outside, in all that dust and pother, the elements are working together for your good?"

[1] Electrical dust-storm.

Philip laughed. "I feel very well content, thank you. The comfort of contrast always appeals to my selfish nature."

"Hark to that, Belle! I'll never believe in Philip's saintship again," cried her husband triumphantly. "Well, I must be off; there was the tiniest crumble in the dam, and I must get my bandits to work on it before dark. By the way, Marsden, Afzul said he was coming to see you this afternoon. If so, sit on him. The beggar has been half mutinous of late. Faugh! what an atmosphere; but I dare say it will be better outside."

"How well he is looking," said Philip, as he watched the figure disappearing through the haze. "I wish I could see you do more credit to the 'heavenly calm.'" He made the remark lightly enough, thinking only of his first glance at her when he arrived; a glance which had prompted his swift inquiry as to what was the matter. But he was startled out of all save surprise by the look on her face as she turned towards him from the window.

"Heavenly calm!" she echoed almost wildly. "Yes, for you and for me, and for him; but for the others? You asked me, and I said nothing was the matter. It was a lie, everything is the matter! Outside there, in the dust, —" as she spoke the hand she had laid on his arm in her vehemence tightened to a clutch, her eyes fixed themselves

on something. "John!" she cried. "He is coming back, running! Oh, what is it? what is it?"

Almost before he could grasp her meaning the door burst open, and John Raby was back in the room, calm for all his excitement. "Quick, Marsden, quick! get your revolver, — the fools are at the dam! There's treachery, and not a moment to lose! Quick, man, quick!"

"Treachery! What? How? I don't understand — Belle, what is the matter?"

For she had thrown herself between him and her husband, and stood with one hand on his breast as if to push him back. "He shall not go; he does not understand!" she cried passionately. "I tell you he shall not go until I have told him all. He does not know, he does not understand; it is not fair — Philip! — "

"— Don't heed her, Marsden; it's all fancy, and there is no time for words. I tell you they are at the dam, — the fools!" cried John, his self-control seeming to give way at the very thought of danger to the work of his hands. "Belle, let him go! I command you, — I entreat — "

But she stood firm, every fibre of her nature tense in this final conflict, a conflict not so much between the two men, as between her instincts and her beliefs. And yet, the sense of personal injury so long repressed made her words reckless. "You

have taken everything from him — everything that makes life worth living — even his love. And because of that he has given up everything without a word; and now you ask his honour, his life, in a bad cause; but you shall not have it! Philip! if you love me, — if you love your own good name, — stay where you are. It is I who command it!"

With an oath John Raby dashed past her to the office, but ere Philip had time to do more than unclasp, as gently as he could, the arms she had flung about his neck, her husband was back again, revolver in hand, his clear face blurred by anger; sheer, animal anger.

"Belle!" he cried, beside himself with uncontrolled passion, "don't add this folly to your other foolishness. Think! I am your husband; so choose between us. Choose between us I say, or by God —"

She interrupted him in tones so bitter that no escape remained from their finality. "Choose? Yes! I have chosen at last — at last! Philip shall not suffer."

His answer came swiftly! "Then stay with your lover; I might have known I was a fool to trust a woman."

Ere the echo of his voice died away he was out in the storm again, leaving those two in a silence worse than the words just spoken. He had disengaged her arms, but her hands had tightened

themselves on his, and so they stood face to face, looking into each other's eyes. But in his lay a pity and tenderness before which hers failed and fell.

"You must not go," she whispered, low and fast. "I have not told you, and I ought to have told you. He had no right to use your name, to be so hard; and they may kill you. I have a right to tell you, — surely I have a right to so much?"

Her warm clasp held him unresisting, yet in his heart of hearts he was not thinking of her, only of some expedient which should avoid the last resource of brute force; for with all his tenderness his pride was in arms. "Have I not given you enough, Belle?" he said hoarsely. "Will you not even leave me my courage?"

With a sob she flung his hands from her as if they bit and stung. "Go!" she cried. "You are unjust, ungenerous; but go!"

He did not wait. Torn as he was by love and compassion for the woman he was leaving so forsaken and abased, he could not pause in the mad hurry which seized him, even for a word of comfort; time, if he was to retrieve his self-respect and hers, was too precious. Another instant and he was searching frantically for his revolver among his half-unpacked things, and feeling a certain fierce joy in anticipation of the struggle to come. A

quick snatch, a breathless relief, and he looked up to find Afzul Khân standing by the only door of exit from the room. "Afzul!" he cried, "why are you here? Why are you not at your post when there is danger afoot? Follow me at once!"

But the Pathan's answer was to close the door and stand with his arm thrown across it, bolt-wise. Then he looked at the Major boldly, yet respectfully. "I'm here, *Huzoor*, because I have grown tired of helping a tyrant. The *sahib* should be tired of it too and take his reward. That is what I came to make known to the Presence."

"Let me pass, fool!" shouted Philip, struggling to get at the door. But Afzul was his match in strength, and, even as he resisted, found time for words. "Listen, *Huzoor!* If it is the money, let it go. I have here in my pocket something that will put more money into the *mem's* hand. So you can have her and the money too."

"Are you mad? Let me pass, I say, or it will be the worse for you!"

"For you, *Huzoor*. There is danger; the men mean fight, but if Raby *sahib* has none to back him, he will choose prudence. He wrought the evil — I will not stir, *sahib*, till you have listened — he wrought the evil, let him bear the loss. You —"

Philip gave one glance round for other means of escape; then the breathless hurry of the last few

moments left his voice and manner. "Stand back, Afzul," he said quietly, "or I'll fire. One, — two, — three! — "

An instant's pause, and the hand on the trigger wavered. Something, the memory of those days and nights in the smoky cave, perhaps, came between Philip and the wrist he aimed at, for the ball struck the door below it, splintering the wood. But that waver, slight though it was, caught the Pathan's quick eye. He threw up his arm with a laugh of malicious triumph. "We are quits, *Huzoor!* We have both been fools before the other's bravery; that is the end, the end at last!"

The meaning of his words, even the words themselves, were lost on Philip, who was already down the verandah steps, his head, as he ran, bent low to save himself from being blinded by the swirl of dust which now swept past continuously. Afzul scowled after the retreating figure. "Fool!" he muttered between his teeth. "But I have done with him now — done with everything save this accursed letter. I wish I had sent it to the *mem* at first. It belongs to her, and she is the best of the bunch."

So muttering he made his way to the verandah, and raising the bamboo screen looked into the drawing-room. Belle, crushed to a dull endurance by the consciousness of her own impotence to aid; nay more, with the very desire to help killed by the

awful knowledge that both those men had flung her aside as something beneath their manhood, had thrown herself face downward on the sofa, where she lay with clenched hands, striving to regain some power of thought or action; yet in the very effort driving herself to greater helplessness by her wild insistence that time was passing, that she must decide, must do something.

"*Huzoor!*"

She started to her feet, and found Afzul beside her with outstretched hand. The sight, by rousing a physical fear, brought back the courage which never failed her at such times. "Well?" she asked boldly.

"I am not come to hurt you, *Huzoor*, but to give you this. It belongs to you."

She put out her hand mechanically, and took a small package done up, native fashion, in a bit of old brocade.

"Mine! what is it?" she asked in a dull tone.

"It is Dick *sahib's* will. He died fighting like the brave one he was; but they were all brave, those three, — Dick *sahib*, and Marsden *sahib*, and Raby *sahib*. They die fighting, — curse them!"

They die fighting? With the first cry she had given, Belle broke from him, and, still clutching the packet, followed in the footsteps of those two; and as she ran, beaten back by the wind, and half-blinded

by the sand, she scarcely thought of their safety, only that she might get there in time. Only in time, dear God! only in time to show them that she was brave also.

The lurid yellow of the dust-storm had darkened or lightened everything to the same dull tint; the sand beneath her feet, the sky above, the swaying trees between, each and all seemed like shadows thrown upon a screen, and her own flying figure the only reality in an empty world of dreams. Not a sound save the broad rush of the wind, not a sight save the dim dust hazed paths bordered by shrivelled flowers. Then, beyond the garden, the long curve of the dam, the deeper sinking into dun-coloured soil of those frantic feet; and, running with her as she ran, the swirls and dimples of the yellow river angry for all its silence.

If only she might be in time! There, in the centre of the curve, like a swarm of bees, shifting, crowding, pressing, — was that John's fair head in the centre? If the wind were only the other way, she might have heard; but now, even if they were crying for help, she would not hear! —

Suddenly her stumbling flight ceased in a stumbling pause. Was that the wind? She threw up her hands without a cry, and stood as if turned to stone. It seemed to her as if the seconds beat themselves in on her brain — one — two — three —

four — five — not more than that; then a low dull roar ending in silence; silence and peace, for she lay huddled up in a heap upon the ground as if struck by lightning.

CHAPTER XXV.

When John Raby, waking at Belle's touch to find the floods had come, remarked that the people would be taken by surprise, he said truly. The corollary he drew from this premise — that he was to be congratulated on good luck — was not so sure. For there are times when the unforeseen acts as a spur to those who, when prepared, often lack the courage of action. And this was the case with a large body of the malcontents whom Shunker Dâs, aided of late by his lieutenant Râm Lâl, had been diligently instructing in the necessity for resistance at the proper time. But a vague formula of this sort is a very different thing in the eyes of the stolid law-abiding peasant, from the resolution that to-day, this hour, this minute, they had to set aside their inherited endurance, their ancestral calm, and fight. So, had the floods come in due course and after due warning, it is more than probable that even Râm Lâl's reckless desire for revenge would have failed to excite the people to the organised attack on the new dam towards which all Shunker's machinations had tended, and in which he saw at least temporary ruin to his enemy's plans. Fate, however, provided the

element of surprise, and, to these slow-brained rebels, seemed to leave no choice beyond instant revolt or instant submission.

Aided by Râm Lâl's envoys the news that the river was rising travelled fast; down the depression of cultivated land along which — given a high flood-mark — the water might be expected: nor was the assertion wanting that such a flood-mark had already been reached during the past two days, and its benefits neutralised by Raby *sahib's* unholy contrivance. By dawn bands of the restless had begun to drift about from village to village, eager to discuss the position, and by degrees gaining a certain coherence of intention. Even those who hung back from the idea of active interference joining the crowd out of curiosity and so increasing the quantity of human tinder ready for ignition by the smallest spark. Before noon Khân Mahomed Lateef Khân, looking out from his ruined tower, saw a cloud of dust beyond his bare brown fields and ere long was in parley with a recruiting band.

"Not I," swore the old man fiercely; "these are not days for honest blows. My son — God smite those who smote him! — could tell you so much; and his son must learn his father's wisdom. Ye are fools! Let every one of you give one rupee after the manner of a wedding, and go purchase the slithering lies of a pleader. Then may ye have jus-

tice in the *sahibs'* courts; not otherwise. Besides, look ye. Shunker is in this, and his jackal Râmu; and by the twelve Imaums I hate them worse than Raby *sahib!*"

"Râm Lâl hath cause," retorted a villainous-looking goldsmith, hailing from the village where Belle had been pelted by the children. "We Hindus, Khân *sahib*, are peace-lovers till they touch our women."

The old Mussulman burst into a scornful laugh. "Best not chatter thus to me, Gurdit! *Inshallah;* there have been times when honest blows with a good sword have brought the faithful many a Hindu *peri!* But I quarrel not, so go your way, fools, like sheep to slaughter if so your wisdom teaches. I bide at home."

"Nay but, Khân *sahib*," expostulated that very Peru with whom Shunker had begun his work, "we go not to, or for slaughter. We mean to petition first to Marsden *sahib*, who comes to-day; so the Pathan hath given out."

"What!" interrupted the Khân with a frown. "He hath returned! Then go ye doubly to slaughter, for there is one who dallies not with words. He knows how to smite, and if it comes to blows I know which side good swords — But there! I bide at home."

Nor, despite their urgent importunities, would he

consent even to join those who favoured a petition. No doubt the racial disinclination to be mixed up with idolaters had something to do with the refusal; beyond this there was a stronger desire to give no help to Shunker; and stronger than all was that liking for sheer pluck which makes a native regiment, recruited from the martial races and led by Englishmen it trusts, well nigh the perfection of a warlike weapon. Many records bear witness to this fact, none more so than the story of Ahmad Kheyl, when, but for an Englishman's voice and the steady response of Indian soldiers, the tale might have been writ "disaster" instead of "victory." Perhaps some of the three thousand Ghazies who on that day dashed like an avalanche down the hill-side on to the thin brown line guarding a mistaken retreat of red-coats may have expected colour to side with colour. If so they paid dearly for their error. It is pluck with pluck; and the words "*Retreat be damned — stand fast, men!*" attributed rightly or wrongly to an Englishman not mentioned in despatches, were sufficient to weld two nationalities into a wall which broke the force of one of the most desperate charges ever made. At least so runs the story, — out of despatches.

Khân Mahomed Lateef Khân, then, retreated growling to his tumbledown roof, and betook himself inconsequently to polishing up his sword. Half

an hour afterwards, however, he suddenly bade old Fâtma bring him his company raiment with the medals and clasps of his dead sons sewn on it. Then he said a brief farewell to the child, left the women without a word, and went over to borrow the pink-nosed pony of the pleader's father, who, being the Government accountant, was of course discreetly at home.

"Why didst not make thy son take up the case without payment?" asked the old man wrathfully, as his neighbour held the stirrup for him to mount. "Then should I not have had to go in mine old age and strive for peace, — mark you, for peace!"

But as he rode off, the old sword clattered merrily about his old legs, and he smiled, thinking of the gift given when the light of his eyes lay sick in the *mem's* arms.

"The sword is for her and hers, according to my oath," he said to himself. "God knows it may be peace; I will do naught to hinder it; but with Marsden *sahib* — *Allah Akbar!* at least they do not worship stocks and stones like these pigs."

So behind the gathering cloud of witnesses, half hidden in the gathering dust, came the pink-nosed pony ready for peace or war. The odds, either for one or the other, flickered up and down a dozen times as village after village sent or held back its contingent. Finally it flared up conclusively with

the advent of Râmu at the head of his particular villains, armed not only with sticks and stones, but with picks and shovels. Like a spark among tinder the suggestion flamed through the mass, — why waste time in words when, without a blow, except at solid earth, they could bring the floods into their own channel, since Afzul and his gang had declared in favour of the people? So said Râmu, and the peasants were only too ready to believe him, seeing that picks and shovels were more to their minds than blows. Thus, while the trio of aliens to whom that low curve of earthwork meant so much, were talking and laughing over their lunch, the dam was being assailed by a swarm of men eager for its destruction. Almost at the same time the Khân *sahib*, spurring the pink-nosed pony to the overseer's hut, found Afzul asleep, or pretending to sleep. Perhaps the hint of bribery was true; perhaps the Pathan thought a crisis was needed; at all events he was too crafty to show his hand to his stern old patron, and set off ostensibly to give the alarm at the house and summon his gang, who by a curious coincidence happened to be employed half a mile or so further up the river. Not till he saw his messenger reach the verandah did the Khân seek the scene of action. Picks and shovels indeed! Well! these ploughmen had a right to use such weapons, and he would stand by and see fair play.

How Afzul fulfilled his mission has already been told; also the result of John Raby's appeal for help to Philip Marsden. To say that the former could not believe his eyes, when, on first turning out of the garden, he caught sight of the crowd gathered on the dam, is but a feeble description of the absolutely incredulous wrath which overpowered him. He had been prepared for opposition, perhaps even for attack, when such attack was reasonable. But that these fools, these madmen, should propose to cut a channel with the full weight of a flood on the dam was inconceivable. As he ran back for his revolver, a savage joy at the danger to the workers themselves merged itself with rage at the possible ruin of his labour, and a fierce determination by words, warnings, and threats to avert the worst. They could not be such fools, such insensate idiots! As he passed the workmen's huts on his return, he shouted to Afzul, and getting no reply ran on with a curse at all traitors. He was alone against them all, but despite them all he would prevail. As he neared the crowd, bare-headed, revolver in hand, he felt a wild desire to fire without a word and kill some one, no matter whom. The suspicion, however, that this attack could not proceed from anything but revenge had grown upon him, and became conviction as he saw that the largest portion of his enemies were of the ruck; men who never did a

hand's turn, and who even now stood by, applauding, while others plied spade and mattock. In the latter, in their stolid wisdom and experience, lay his best chance, and he slipped the revolver to his pocket instantly. "Stop, you fools!" he shouted, "stop! Peru! Gunga; where are your wits? The flood, — the flood is too strong." Then, recognising the old Khân, he appealed instinctively to him for support. "Stop them, Khân *sahib!* you are old and wise; tell them it is madness!"

As he spoke, reaching the growing gap, he leapt down into it and wrested a spade from the man nearest to him. It was yielded almost without resistance, but a murmur ran through the bystanders, and the workers dug faster.

"Jodha! Boota! Dhurma!" rose John's voice again, singling out the men he knew to be cultivators. "This is folly! tell them it is folly, Khân *sahib!*"

"I know not," answered the other moodily; "'tis shovel, not sword-work, and they have a right to the water — before God, *sahib*, they have a right to so much!"

"Before God, they will have more than they want," interrupted that eager tone; and something in its intelligent decision arrested one or two of the older workers. They looked round at the swirling waste of the river and hesitated.

"'Tis but his craft," cried Râmu excitedly, showing himself for the first time; "I know Raby well. On! On, my brothers! He has wiles for men as well as for women!"

The revolver came out of John Raby's pocket again swiftly, but an ominous surge together of the crowd showed him that it must be a last resource when all else had failed; and now there were steps behind him coming down the embankment hard and fast. The next instant Philip's voice with the ring of accustomed command in it came sharp. "Listen! The first of you who puts spade to ground, God save his soul from damnation!"

The native is essentially dramatic. The very turn of his speech, where the imperative remains intact even when it has filtered through other lips, shows him to be so; and Philip Marsden, with the intimate knowledge of years, counted not unwisely on this characteristic for effect. The surprise, the appearance of one who in a vague way they considered of the right sort, the certainty that the voice they heard meant what it said, produced a general pause among the diggers; a pause during which Mahomed Lateef drew his sword gently from the scabbard.

"Listen again!" cried Philip. "Put down those spades and you shall have justice. I promise it."

But even as he spoke John Raby gave a quick excited cry. "Back! Marsden, back! the dam is

cracking! Back, for God's sake! It is too late! Let the fools be!"

He sprang up the gap, and as he did so a man sprang after him. It was Râmu, ready for the deed he had come to do, fearful lest by this unexpected flight his prey might escape him. The glance of a knife, a cry, more of surprise than pain, and John Raby, twisting round in a last desire to get at his assassin, overbalanced and fell headlong down into the ditch. The next instant, before Philip's revolver could single out the criminal, the old Khân's sword swirled above the high turban.

"*Allah-i-Hukk! Allah-i-Akbar!*" (God is Right and Might.) The fervour of youth rang in the familiar war-shout, and the memory of youth must have nerved the hand, for Râmu's head heeled over on his shoulder in ghastly fashion as he doubled up beneath the force of the blow. But ere he fell the ground beneath him split as if for a grave, and with a hiss of water pouring through the cracks the loosened soil gave way on all sides. Philip, bounding down to reach his fallen friend, felt a sudden dizziness as the solid earth swirled round, split up, broke into islands. Then, with an awful swiftness, while the crowd fought frantically for a crumbling foothold, the dam, like a child's sand-castle before an incoming wave, broadened, sank, melted, disappeared, leaving nothing but a sheet of water racing madly to find its old haunts.

Then it was, when the scene in which all her life seemed bound up disappeared bodily from before her eyes, that Belle Raby threw up her hands and forgot the whole world for a time.

Philip, strong swimmer as he was, struggled hard with the underdraw ere he rose to the surface, shook the mud and water from his eyes, and looked about him. Many a wretch swept past him shrieking for aid, but he searched for something which, even amid his own danger, he could not think of without a curse. Once, twice, thrice, he dived after a hint, a hope; then, coming on Mahomed Lateef, drifting half-unconsciously down stream, he gave up the useless search and, buoying the old man's head against his shoulder, struck out for the back eddy. He was so spent when he reached the shore, that he could with difficulty drag his burden to the dry warm sand and sink down beside it. The whole incident had passed so rapidly that it seemed but an instant since he had been running down the embankment, eager to be in time. And he had been in time for what? Suddenly he remembered Belle and staggered to his feet. The storm was darker than ever and aided by the afternoon shadows wrapped everything in a dim twilight which hid all save the immediate foreground. Still he could see from the ebb of the flood in front of him that the great mass of upheld water must have surged first in a forward direction, and

then recoiled to find the lower levels which lay at right angles. Thus it seemed probable that many of those swept away in the great rush might have been left high and dry a quarter of a mile or so lower down; and in this case nothing was more likely than a further attack on the house, for once blood has been shed, — and that some of those engaged must have lost their lives seemed certain — even the proverbially placid peasantry of India loses its head. Belle, therefore, must be found, not merely to tell her of the calamity, but to secure her safety; the instant after this thought flashed upon him, Philip Marsden was making his way to the house, stumbling as he ran through heavy sand and in the teeth of a choking dust-storm. Men, even strong men, have in such a storm lost their way and been smothered to death as they sought shelter in some hollow, but Philip was too set on his purpose to think of pausing.

"Belle! Belle!" he cried as he ran up the verandah-steps and burst into the drawing-room. She was not there. "Belle! Belle! I want you." But there was no reply. The absence of servants, the deserted verandah, did not surprise him; news flies fast among the people. But Belle? was it possible she too had ventured out, perhaps along the dam itself? The very thought turned him sick with fear, and he dashed into her room calling on her

again and again. The thousand and one delicate tokens of her presence hit him hard by contrast with the idea of her out there alone, perhaps swirling down that awful stream with which it seemed to him he was still struggling.

"Belle! Belle!" He was out of the house once more, through the garden, down by the huts. Was it a year, or a minute ago, that he had passed that way, running, as now, to be in time? Or were past and present nothing but a bad dream? One of those endless flights from some unknown horror which survive a thousand checks, and go on and on despite perpetual escape? No, it was not a dream! The last time there had been a low curve of earth before him where now nothing showed save a dim yellow flood sliding so smoothly that it seemed to have been sliding there since time began. Each step bringing him nearer to it brought him nearer also to despair. Then, just as he had given up hope, on the very brink, so close that one clenched hand hung over the water, he found her lying as she had fallen; found her none too soon, for even as he stooped to raise her, another few inches of loosened soil undermined by the current fell with a dull splash, and he realised that ere long the river would have turned her forgetfulness to death.

Lifting her as best he could in his arms, he paused an instant to consider what had best be done. One

thing was certain, neither house nor hut was safe until time showed the temper of the survivors. Yet help and remedies of some sort he must have, and shelter too from storm and night. He thought of Kirpo, but decided not to trust her. A lucky decision, since to seek her would have been but waste of time, as, recognising her husband among the rioters, she had fled into the jungle with her child. The servants might be found if fear had not dispersed them, but where in the meantime was he to leave Belle? At last his thoughts returned to the old Khân. He was faithful, and if he had recovered might at least keep watch while Philip sought other help. Besides, not far from where he had left the old man, Philip had noticed a reed shanty built against the abutment of the dam, and so hidden from the sight of all save those coming from that side. He determined therefore to carry Belle thither, and if he could find Mahomed Lateef to leave her in his charge. This was no easy task, for Belle, unconscious as she was, proved an awkward burden over such a rough road, and it was a great relief to be able to lay her down at last in comparative shelter and assure himself that she was still alive; for, as he had struggled on, the dead weight in his arms had filled him with apprehension. The next thing was to find the Khân. Here fate proved kind, and within a few yards of the shanty Philip came upon

him, battling against the wind yet finding breath for a running fire of curses on all idolaters. To cut short his gratitude and explain what was wanted took but a moment; the next saw Philip hurrying towards the house again, since, if the rioters returned, time might run short. It did, despite his hurry, so that after vainly searching for the servants, he was still rummaging for more ammunition and (most potent weapon of all) for money, when the sound of advancing voices warned him to be off. Thanks to the almost blinding dust there was little fear of being seen in his retreat; yet when, on reaching the shanty, he found Belle still quite unconscious, he recognised that the most difficult part of his task had yet to come. He had brought back a few comforts snatched up hastily as he made his escape, and now set to work to force a few drops of brandy down her throat, wrap her in warmer garments, and chafe her cold hands and feet. To do so he had to unclasp the fingers of her right hand by force and withdraw something she held in it. This, without giving it a glance, he slipped into the breast-pocket of his coat and so continued his efforts. After a time her colour became less deathlike: she moaned once or twice, turning her head aside as if to escape from some distasteful sight; but beyond this there was no change, and the hope of her recovering the shock sufficiently to aid in

her own escape seemed very slender. Nor did Philip wonder at her collapse when he thought of what it must have been for her to stand by helpless, and see those who had left her in anger swept away into the unforgiveness of death.

"*Huzoor*," whispered the old Khân, who in deference to inviolable custom had been sitting with averted face in the doorway, where, shivering from the chill of the wind through his wet clothes he had been considering the position carefully, "We must get out of this. To sit here will have us crippled with ague by dawn. There is my pony; I will go fetch it from the huts. Perchance they may not see me; perchance they would not touch me if they did, for Râmu — the man I killed, *Huzoor* — hath no blood-kin in these parts, and death cools friendship. Besides, their wrath will be only against white faces. When I am gone ten minutes, lift the *mem*, and make for the dip in the south road by the *nullah*. If all goes well, you will hear hoofs ere long. But if these fools are set on blood, make your way as best you can due south. Eight miles, more or less, keeping the left bank till you see a square-towered house. Give this to the women; they will obey it."

He took the talisman signet from his thumb, and slipping it into Philip's hand left the hut. The next ten minutes seemed interminable; and the relief of action when it came was great. This time Belle

proved an easier burden, when wrapped closely in a shawl and lifted leisurely. Once amongst the tall tiger-grass in the *nullah* he rested his knee against a high tussock and still holding her in his arms waited anxiously, for he was now on the direct route to the house and liable to come across a straggling rioter at any moment. The risk, however, had to be run, as the only available bridge over a cut from the river lay a few yards further on. Sheltered by the high grass, Philip's eyes were practically useless to him, and the pony's hoofs being deadened by the sand, it needed a low whistle from the Khân to bring him out on to the road beside the pink-nosed pony.

"Give me her here, across the pummel, *Huzoor*," said the old man briefly. "Your legs are younger than mine, and time is precious. So, gently! *Mashallah!* I have seen women carried thus before this! — women who gave the rider more trouble than she is like to do. Now, if you are ready, *Huzoor;* for though 'tis dark enough there will be a blaze ere long. Those low-caste, pig-leather-working dogs had got to the *sahib's* brandy-bottles, and you know what that means."

"Did they try to stop you?" asked Philip, when after crossing the bridge in silent anxiety they struck into the comparative safety of the jungle.

The old man grunted softly, his anger tempered by the necessity for caution. "By the twelve

Imaums they said I was afraid! — *I*, Mahomed Lateef Syyed! — that I was sneaking away! And I, — I never even called them pigs."

Despite his anxiety Philip could not resist a smile, partly of confidence, for no better proof of the Khân's resolution to bring Belle safely out of trouble could have been found than this unparalleled meekness. So they went on swiftly. Philip at the bridle-rein, the old Khân supporting Belle partly on his arm, partly by a dexterous arrangement of his scabbard, over which the old man chuckled as if in contented reminiscence of bygone days. "'Tis as I said, *Huzoor*," he remarked pointing to a red flush rising behind them. "That is the bungalow roof. 'Tis well she is out of it so far." Philip thinking of all the horrors of the past few hours, and contrasting them with his memories of Belle in her pretty home, clenched his hands, wishing *he* were nearer. Perhaps the Khân's sympathy saw to his thought, for the old man went on in aggrieved tones, "And we get no good from it. Not even an honest set-to when the women are safe; for to-morrow the *tâhseeldar*[1] and the police will spoil sport. Besides, these shovel-diggers will be afraid of their own actions by dawn! Even now we are safe; safe as if we are driving down the watered road of a cantonment, our only care to convey this poor soul to woman's hands.

[1] Deputy-Collector, *i.e.*, chief native official.

Inshallah! The women have the best of it in your reign, *Huzoor!*"

"Well! some one will have to answer for the day's work," replied Philip grimly.

"Some *one*. Ay, that is to-day's law, and even of that I know not," grumbled the Khân. "For look you, Râmu and none else killed the *sahib*, and I killed Râmu, so that is done. The rest were peaceable enough, God knows, and you hang not for the bursting of *bunds* (dams) and burning of bungalows. There is no justice nowadays!"

It was past midnight ere the pony pulled up of its own accord at a ruinous door, and the owner with mighty shouts and much impatient rattling of his sword-hilt on the panels roused the inmates. "Come forth, Fâtma," he cried to the white-sheeted form muttering faint excuses which appeared at length. "Heed not the stranger to-night, — Haiyât also. He is my brother, and this, look you, is my sister. We will carry her within to the women's room, and ye must see to her as women should, and bring us word of her state speedily. 'Tis best so, *Huzoor;* Fâtma is learned in woman's lore and hath simples. She will tell us if there be hurts or danger. For to-night the *mem* had best stay here, since there is nought to be done save rest."

"Not so, Khân *sahib;* I must return and see after —"

The old Mussulman raised his right hand solemnly. "Let the dead rest in peace also for to-night, *Huzoor*. I saw Raby *sahib* fall, and I know how dead clay toucheth the earth to which it returns. The knife struck home, *Huzoor;* right through the heart! Lo, it was Kismet! Raby *sahib* is dead, but his slayer is dead also, so we, his comrades, may rest awhile till dawn comes."

"I will wait till dawn," said Philip, "and hear what the women say."

So the Khân disposed himself to sleep with the calm of an old campaigner, and Philip sat out in the warm night air waiting for the dawn. The storm had ended in weak-minded thunder and a few spots of dry rain, which had nevertheless left a freshness behind them. Here and there through the parting drifts of cloud and dust the stars twinkled brightly, making Philip's thoughts turn to a future more peaceful than past or present. He drove the erring fancies back to realities with a certain scorn of himself, but they broke from control again and again with the insistence which truth brings to bear on conventionalities. It was true that by and by time would heal the present trouble; it was true that by and by regrets would soften. There was no hurry, no thought but pity and sorrow for what was, and yet he started from a vision of peace to find old Fâtma by his side. The Khân had long since been

snoring placidly, so the old matron's eyes could look into Philip's with straightforward confidence.

"The *mem* will do for now, *Huzoor*. There is no danger, none at all. But by and by, in the months to come, may God save from harm the child that will be born!"

He rose to his feet white to the very lips. Just Heaven! Was this poor Belle's last legacy!

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE old Khân's forecast proved correct in every particular. By noon on the day after the outbreak the ringleaders were safe in the lock-up awaiting trial, and, save for the smouldering house and the yellow flood of water sliding down the old channel, there was nothing to tell of the past night's work. For the dead bodies had been carried to their homes, and the women wailed over them discreetly behind mud walls, as if they had died in their beds. All save John Raby's, and that was making a dismal procession towards the nearest railway station, preceded at a little distance by poor Belle, crushed and but half-conscious of the truth. Philip, riding by the side of the litter, felt there was something exasperating in the absolute insignificance of the whole affair. It almost seemed as if some one must be to blame, as if something could surely have been done to avert so terrible an ending to what was, after all, but a storm in a tea-cup. But then neither he, nor the authorities who had to inquire into the matter, were in possession of that master-key to the whole position which was to be found in Shunker Dâs's desire for revenge. For he had worked carefully, leaving scarcely a trace

behind him; and though Kirpo came forward boldly to declare his responsibility, her palpable motive for spite discredited her statements. Besides, at the very outset of the inquiry, it became clear that John Raby's murder by Râmu had nothing whatever to do with his action in regard to the water; and however absurd the man's jealousy might seem, it was certainly sufficient to explain the rancour with which Kirpo's husband had set himself to conspire against the Englishman. It was evident therefore that the latter had met his death, not from his harshness towards the people, but from the good-nature with which he had originally espoused the woman's cause. Both Philip Marsden and the Khân could only witness to the freedom from all attempt at personal violence on the part of the crowd, even when John Raby had thrown himself among the workers and taken a spade from them by force; while the subsequent burning and looting of the factory was evidently an after impulse caused by the rage of the survivors at the loss of their companions. The whole affair, in short, being one of those perfectly maddening mistakes and misapprehensions which serve sometimes to emphasise the peculiar conditions of life in our Indian Empire.

All this, or most of it, was in due time dinned into the widow's ears by kindly but strange voices; for there was one familiar voice which she dreaded

to hear because the owner knew of something which the others did not know: something she could not remember without despair. So day after day she lay in the spare room of the head official's house,— that spare room which shelters such an odd variety of guests, the travelling Member of Parliament, the widow, the homeward and outward bound, the dying, sometimes the dead — and when Philip's name was mentioned she would turn her head away and beg to be left alone a little longer, just a little longer. Hurt as he could not fail to be at her avoidance of him, he understood the reason of it all too well, and waited patiently. Then the last day of his leave came, and he sent to say he *must* see her before he left; so Belle, white as her widow's cap, nerved herself for the interview with the man whom she had preferred before her dead husband. That is how, in her abject remorse, she put it to herself. She had chosen her lover. The natural indignation at deceit, the generous instinct, the sense of injustice which had forced her to the decision were all forgotten before the memory of those minutes of delay. How could she meet Philip? — Philip, round whose neck she had thrown her arms while defying the husband whom she had sent alone to seek death! That Philip had refused to play the part she gave him, that he had forced her to play a better one herself, brought her no comfort. She was too much absorbed in the scene

as it affected her and the dead man to care what Philip had said or done. The very fact of his entering into it at all was an offence. She would not consider him in the least, except to tell herself that she was also responsible to *him* for the loss of his money. To this additional self-reproach she clung firmly, as if to a protection, and when she saw him pausing for half a second at the first glimpse of her in her widow's weeds, she thrust it forward hastily, like a shield against his sympathy.

"I am so sorry," she began coldly, "it was not his fault. He did his best about the money, and now you have lost it all."

A sort of irritated amazement came over him. What did he care for the money? Why should she be fretting over it when his thoughts were full of her,— of her only? He looked into her grief-darkened eyes with a certain impatience — the old impatience at seeing her unhappy — the old eagerness to rouse her into hope. "Oh Belle! what does all that matter? Don't look so miserable over it, for pity's sake!"

She drew her hand from his, slowly, with her eyes full on his face. "You are fond of saying that. But how can I look anything else when I killed my husband?"

"Belle!" The horrified surprise in his tone scarcely expressed his bewilderment, for he had

little experience of women or the morbid exaggerations in which, at times, they find a positive relief. "Belle, what do you mean? How can you say such things?"

"What is the use of hiding the truth from ourselves?" she answered almost with satisfaction at her own self-torture. She had not meant, at least she thought she had not meant, to broach the subject at all; but now that it was begun she threw herself into it with out reserve. "You know as well as possible that it was I who really killed him; I who prevented your being in time to save him."

There was more pity than amazement in his voice now. "Have you been tormenting yourself with that thought all these long days? Poor child! No wonder you have been miserable. Belle, my dear, it isn't true. You know yourself,—surely you must know it isn't true."

"I know nothing of the sort," she interrupted quickly, with a dull hard voice. "I kept you, and you were too late. Nothing can alter that. It is the truth."

"It is not the truth," he answered quietly. "If you had but let me see you at first I might have spared you this unnecessary pain. Perhaps I ought to have insisted on seeing you, but—" He went on after a slight pause, "but I respected your wishes, because—"

"Because you knew I had reason to dread seeing you!" she broke in passionately. "Because you knew it was I who killed him! Because you were afraid! Don't deny it, Philip; you knew,— yes! you knew why."

He stood before her, manly and strong, pitiful yet full of vexation. "I will not have you say such things — of me at any rate, Belle. I will not even have you think them of me; or of yourself either. In your heart of hearts you know they are not true. True! — they are lies, Belle, wicked lies. You have been working yourself up in your loneliness to believe something impossible, preposterous, and it is my fault for letting you be lonely. I was not too late. No power on earth could have saved John. I was there armed, ready; the Khân was there also with drawn sword; yet we could not save him. No one could have saved him. *That* is the truth."

"If you had gone sooner," she murmured, pressing her hands tightly together till the rings on them cut and hurt, as if she were glad of pain, of something to appease her own self-condemnation; "if you had not been delayed, you might have persuaded him to be more cautious."

Philip almost smiled, a smile of vexed surprise at her perversity. "My dear Belle! Am I a man to preach caution when I am opposed? Was John a man to listen to such caution when the time for

action had come? Nonsense! I don't wish to be hard, dear; I don't say, mind you, that the remembrance of his anger is not very bitter — God only knows how bitter — for you to bear. But, Belle, if he knows anything now, he knows that he was wrong."

"He was not wrong; he was right. I chose you and forsook him."

Philip gave a little impatient shake of his head, then walked away to the window feeling how hopeless it was to argue with a woman in Belle's position. A man was absolutely helpless before such weakness and such strength. Yet, after a pause, he returned to the attack by a side route. "Besides," he said, coming back to where she was seated, and standing beside her resting one hand on the back of her chair, "it was not really you who delayed me. It was something else of which you know nothing. If I had seen you I would have told you, but there was no use mentioning it to others because the man had gone and there was nothing to be done. It was Afzul kept me. He came to my room when I went to fetch my revolver, and barred the door. He wanted me to listen as you did. I think he was mad, but I had to fire ere he would let me pass. You see it was he who delayed me, not you. One reason why I did not mention it was this: the man was a deserter, but he had saved my life and,— I think — I think he must have been mad."

But Belle made no answer. With her head resting on her hand she was frowning slightly in pursuit of a fugitive memory. "Afzul!" she echoed at last in puzzled tones. "I had quite forgotten; but surely he came to me in the drawing-room. He gave me something and he said something; surely about Dick! Could it have been about Dick?"

Her eyes sought Philip's for the first time with appeal, and he was sorry to chill the interest in them with a negative. Yet what could Afzul possibly have to say about poor Dick Smith? "Hardly, I should think; I doubt if they ever met even at Faizapore. But this reminds me,— you had something tight clasped in your hand when I found you close to the river: — so close,— did they tell you how close it was to death, my dear, when I came upon you lying — Oh, Belle, so close!"

"Something in my hand," echoed Belle coldly. "What did you do with it?"

"Like you I had forgotten," said Philip, recovering from the break in his voice. "I put it in the pocket of my coat when I was trying to bring you back to consciousness in the hut. I dare say it is there still. Shall I go and see?"

Her affirmative sent him away relieved at the more human interest in her face. A minute afterwards he returned with a little brocaded packet looking as if it had lain in damp lodgings. "I hope it isn't hurt,"

he said lightly; "but having no servant here, my clothes have dried as best they could, and it feels rather pulpy. Open it and see what parting gift that inexplicable compound of fidelity and treachery left behind him. He had a great admiration for you, Belle."

"It is not for me after all. It is for you," she replied after a pause, as she smoothed out the long blue envelope which had been rolled round a smaller packet. "At least I think so. The writing above is smudged, but 'Marsden, 101st Sikhs' is quite clear. Look at it, while I open the other."

He took the letter from her calmly, without a misgiving. His first glance at it, however, roused a sudden doubt, a sudden memory; but ere he had grasped the meaning of his own thoughts, Belle's hand was on his arm, and her voice appealing to him in a new, glad tone of hope. "Oh Philip, it is Dick's ring! I have seen him wear it, — so often; I can't be mistaken. It is Dick's ring,— can he be alive,— is he,— do you think he can be alive still?"

For an instant they stood so, she like a resurrection of her girlhood, he stupidly staring at a curious dark stain blotting out part of the address. Then the truth began to dawn upon him, and his hand clenched in a growing passion. "No!" he said fiercely, and his voice was almost a whisper at first. "No! This is his will,— the will I would not take,

— Afzul! My God! Afzul had it all the time! He must have been in the Pass, — Ah! I remember, — the *subadar*,— those others, all *his* enemies, — He must have killed the boy,— He must have killed the boy!"

His horror, his anger, burst bounds. He forgot everything else in the wild hatred which rose up in him against the murderer, as he strode up and down the room, silent for the most part, but every now and again breaking out into a passionate regret. Why had he been so blind? To think that all the time this man had nursed him, all the time he had taken so many benefits from that hand, it had been red with poor, brave Dick's blood. Why had he not shot the scoundrel when he had the chance?

But Belle stood as he had left her, the fingers of her right hand still caressing the ring which, half unconsciously, she had slipped to the third finger of her left, where, over-large for the slender resting-place, it almost hid the golden circlet of her wedding ring. Her eyes, soft with a great tenderness, seemed to see nothing but a young face eager in its plea for toleration. Dick, poor Dick! Had anything better than his love ever come into her life? The sight of her as she stood almost with a smile on her face brought a new element into Philip's thoughts. All that time, while Belle had been beating her wings against the cage, Afzul had been

walking about with release in his pocket. "It is God's will!" The scene in the verandah at Saudaghur on the first night of their return from death recurred to Philip's mind, as such forgotten incidents do when time has shown their true significance, making him realise more clearly than he had ever done before in all his life what mere shuttlecocks in the game of Fate the strongest-willed may be at times. A certain defiant revolt made him cross to where Belle stood and put his arm around her as if to claim her. "The Fates have been against us, my darling," he whispered passionately, "against us all along!"

She scarcely seemed to hear him, scarcely seemed to notice his touch. In truth she had forgotten him, forgotten even her troubles. "Philip," she said, and there was a strange thrill in her voice, "if we had only known, he could have told us what Dick did. It was something very brave, I know; but if we could only be sure what it was."

Before the eyes full of a great tenderness which were raised to his, he felt as far beneath her in his selfishness as she had seemed to him but just now in her morbid weakness. How could he be angry with her? How could he even blame her?

And yet when he left her room at length, he looked so dispirited that the little Irish doctor coming in on his daily visit to Mrs. Raby, felt impelled to clap him on the back and remark somewhat inconse-

quently that "women, God bless 'em!" were only occasionally responsible for their words; certainly not so when their nerves were jangled and out of tune. Whereat Philip's pride rose at the very idea that the bystanders understood, or thought they understood, the position. Perhaps they were even now speculating how soon those two would give up mourning and be married. The only drop of comfort came from Mildred Van Milder, who had come to be with Belle, and take her back to the little house at Missouri when she was fit to travel. And her consolation consisted in a tearful remark that Belle had far better have married Dick Smith. He was very young, of course, and had no money, but Charlie Allsop hadn't any either, and yet she wouldn't change him for all the legacies in the world. The news of the discovery of Dick's will was a nine days' wonder, and even found its way into the daily papers, much to Philip's annoyance. Otherwise the fact itself was a distinct relief, since it gave Belle independence and removed the fear of her choosing poverty in preference to his help; a choice which in her present frame of mind seemed a foregone conclusion. At the same time it was likely to raise a new crop of difficulties, for three years had passed by since the money had fallen in to the charity, and a long time must elapse before it could be recovered; if indeed it could be recovered

at all. Luckily the proving of the will was not difficult, despite the peculiarities of its custody. To begin with it was in Dick's own writing, and the old Khân was able to speak with certainty as to having seen both envelope and ring in the Pathan's possession, and bear out the fact that Philip had taken the brocaded packet from Belle's hand in the hut. The question as to how Afzul had come by it was, in Philip's opinion, all too clear; especially when inquiry proved that the Pathan had at any rate been on the Peiwar Pass about the time of the murder. So far good; the remainder, however, was more puzzling, and Philip felt that Belle made a wise decision in refusing to disturb any existing arrangements until, as she put it, time should show what she ought to do. The doctors strongly advised her going home to England as soon as the advent of the rains should make the long railway journey to Bombay possible. The complete change would give her the best chance of recovering the shock, and she could then see with her own eyes how the money had been spent, and what portion of it, if any, she would care to leave in its present employment.

"I shall meet you in Delhi," he wrote in reply to the letter in which she gave him her final decision, "and see you safe to Bombay. To begin with, there are one or two little business formalities which require my presence as executor, and then I must see

you once more. There is to be a punitive expedition over the frontier in spring; so leave will be impossible until the cold weather after next, and that is a long time. I may never see you again."

She read these words as she sate on the window-seat of the little drawing-room where she had read the news of his death three years before. Three years! Was it only three years, since, with her eyes still wet with the tears she did not understand, she had gone out into the mist and the rain to find that vision of a sunlit world at her feet with John Raby standing at her side? And now he was dead, dead in anger, while tears, far more bitter than those she had shed at the thought of Philip's death, came to her eyes with the thought of seeing him again. Yet the world seemed to have stood still otherwise; the little room, the slanting pines, the drifts of cloud over the hills, even Maud in the rocking-chair, and Mrs. Stuart still aggressive in her tears and widow's caps — for the good lady had ordered a new one in anticipation of Belle's visit, moved thereto by an ill-defined but very kindly impulse of sympathy. But Belle did not know this; she only saw that sameness which is almost irritating when we ourselves have changed so much. She used to sit in the little room where she had slept the night before her wedding, and wonder what she had done to bring herself into this

position; herein, for once, agreeing with Philip, who far away with his regiment asked himself many and many a time what either of them had done of which they needed to be ashamed.

Meanwhile the little household went on its monotonous way contentedly. Charlie was at school, much improved, and glad of Belle's presence; partly because he was fond of her, partly because she occupied his room and thus prevented that weekly return home from Saturday to Monday at which he was beginning to grow restive, since it was almost as derogatory to dignity as being a home-boarder. Mrs. Stuart employed herself in weeping placidly over Belle's misfortunes, and paying visits to her friends, during which she darkly hinted that she had always been against the match; for Mr. Raby had played *écarté*, and though of course he had not lost his money that way, it was not *comme il faut* in a young civilian. Maud was growing older in the rocking-chair, and inclined, as ever, to resent other people's tears.

"I don't think Belle is so much to be pitied after all," she cried captiously. "Other people are not always having legacies left them, and £30,000 means more to a widow than to a married woman. Besides, she needn't remain a widow unless she likes; Philip Marsden has been in love with her all the time." Whereat Mildred, signing her daily letter to Charlie

Allsop with a flourish which would have done credit to the heiress of millions, interrupted her sister hotly. "I think it's a beastly shame to say so all the same, Maudie. I dare say it's true; but I'm sure if any one said such things of me when I was a widow, I'd never marry the man. No, not if I liked him ever so much! I'll tell you what it is: Belle has had a hard time of it; and if poor Dick were only here, as well as his money, I believe she would marry him and be happy."

"My dear girls!" expostulated their mother feebly, "her husband is not six weeks dead till next Tuesday. If any one had suggested marriage to me when poor Colonel Stuart—"

"Oh, that is different, mamma," retorted Mildred impatiently. "Belle only married John by mistake. Lots of girls do the same thing. Mabel has, with her Major; but then she will never find it out, so it doesn't matter. Charlie says—"

"Oh, if Charlie says anything, that settles the matter," broke in Maud peevishly. "I wish you two would get married, and then you would soon cease to think each other perfection. For my part, I consider Belle is not to be pitied. She has plenty of money, and by and by she will have a baby to amuse her when she's tired of other things. What more can any woman want? I'm very sorry for her now, but grief doesn't last forever, and after

all she never was in love with John. That's one comfort."

Perhaps if Belle had been asked she might have denied the last statement. If she had loved him, the past would certainly have been less of a regret, the future less of a fear. What was to be the end of it all? That question clamoured for answer as the big ship began to slide from its moorings. Leaning over the taffrail, her eyes heavy with unshed tears, she could see nothing but Philip standing bareheaded in the boat which slipped landwards so fast. A minute before his hands had been in hers, his kind voice faltering good-bye in her ears. And now? Suddenly her clasped fingers opened in a gesture of entreaty. "Philip!" she whispered. "Come back, come back!"

But the swirl of the screw had caught the boat and Major Marsden was in his place at the tiller-ropes, his face set landwards. The rowers bent to their oars and so, inch by inch, yard by yard, the rippling sunlit water grew between those two. Was that to be the end?

CHAPTER XXVII.

SEVEN years! Time enough, so physiologists tell us, for the whole structure of the body to be worn out and renewed again. And for the mind? Is it to be allowed no chance of change, no throwing aside of effete matter, no relief from the monotony of a fixed body of opinions, thoughts, and emotions? That would be hard indeed. Yet Belle Raby — for she was Belle Raby still — had altered little either outwardly or inwardly in the seven years which had passed since she stood leaning over the taffrail watching a boat slip landwards, and asking herself if that was to be the end of it all. Perhaps this lack of change was the less remarkable because, as she leant over the wicket-gate looking into the lane beyond, she was still watching and waiting, and asking herself what the end was to be. Not, however, as she had done then: for then she had been in a state of nervous collapse and unable to judge fairly of anything or any one, of herself least of all. To do her justice this state of mind had not lasted long; indeed Belle had found herself facing the white cliffs of England, and the uncertain future awaiting her there with more equanimity than she would have

deemed possible or even proper a month before. The long journey home,— that slow passaging day after day towards a set haven regardless of storm or calm,— the imperturbable decision of the big ship which seems to have absorbed your weakness in its strength — the knowledge that day and night, night and day, while you forget, the engines like a great heart are throbbing on purposefully across the pathless sea,— all this has worked many a miracle of healing in mind and body exhausted by the struggle for existence. It wrought one for Belle, luckily, since the future held many a difficulty. Despite them all, as seven years afterwards, she stood bareheaded in the cool English sunshine she looked wonderfully young and happy; even though those seven years had been the fateful ones which find a woman in the twenties and leaves her in the thirties. True it is that wisdom, either of this world or the next, brings a sadness to most eyes, but in this case a sweetness had come with it which more than counterbalanced the loss of gaiety. In fact Belle Raby had never looked more attractive than she did as she stood in a white dress with a Jacqueminot rose tucked away in the lace at her throat leaning over the wicket-gate waiting,— waiting for what?

For Philip, of course. Ten o'clock had just chimed from a church-tower close by, and the time between that and the half-hour had belonged for

years to her best friend. Sometimes during those short thirty minutes of a busy day she wrote to him; sometimes, as now, she stood watching for him with tolerable certainty that, if steamers and trains were punctual, he would step with bodily presence into her life for a few weeks; but most often she was setting time, and space, and absence, and all the trivialities which clip the wings of poor humanity at defiance. In other words she was allowing her imagination to get the better of her common sense. That is one way of putting it. Another is possible to those who, like Belle, have learnt to recognise the fact that the outside world exists for each one of us, not in itself, but in the effect which it produces on our consciousness. Two women are grinding at the mill; the one weeps over the task, the other smiles; just as they choose to weep or smile. The secret of the emotion lies not in the cosmic touch itself, but in the way the consciousness receives it, and in the picture which the imagination draws of our own condition; the abstract truth, the actual reality affects us not at all. So Belle Raby, as she looked out to the wild roses in the hedgerow and the yellow butterflies fluttering over the grey bloom of the flowering grasses, saw nothing of the placid English landscape spread before her eyes. She was standing on a far-away Indian platform where the crows sat on the railings cawing irrelatively, and a tall man in un-

dress uniform was listening to those first words,—"it is father." That had been the beginning of it all; the keynote both of the discords and harmony of the whole. Then suddenly, as irrelatively perhaps as the cawing of the crows, the scene changed. The flood of sunshine faded to mirk and fog; such mirk and fog as humanity and its ways creates in London on a dull November day. An atmosphere of civilisation and culture, say some. Perhaps; but if so, civilisation with all its advantages is apt to smell nasty. She saw a man and a woman standing opposite each other in a London lodging, in a London fog. But five minutes before Philip had come into it buoyantly, decisively, bringing with him a memory of sunshine and purer air. Now he stood with his back to the grey square of the window, his hands stretched out to her in something between command and entreaty. "Belle! put down the child and let me speak to you." And then for the first time, she had gone over to him, with the child still in her arms, and kissed him. "Jack will not trouble me, dear," she said; "he is such a quiet wee mite. Come, let us sit down and talk it over."

Now when lovers fall to talking hand in hand it is proper, even in a novel, to avert one's head and smile, saying that the conversation can have no possible interest to outsiders. Or, if a sentence or two be suggested, it is necessary to insist that love,

divine love, can only find its first expression in mere foolishness. Belle and Philip therefore could evidently not have been lovers, for they talked serious and sound good sense while the year-old Jack with his wide, wistful eyes lay in his mother's arms and listened to it all. What was it to him if more than once a reluctant tear fell on his tiny wrinkled hands, and more than once Philip's voice trembled and then stopped a while? What were such emotions to a life which had come into the world barred from them forever? For Belle's child would never be as other children are; so much was certain; whether he would ever need her care more than another's was yet to be seen. But it was strange, was it not? she seemed to hear herself saying in a calm voice, the steadiness of which surprised her even at the time, that poor Dick's legacy had gone to a hospital for just such poor little God-stricken children.

"Don't, Belle,— don't, for pity's sake,— I can't bear it." That had been the man's cry, bringing home to her the fact that she and Philip had changed places. In the old days a duty had lain between them; a duty lay between them now. Why had she seen evil and shame in this man's love then, and yet find none in it now? Then he had been calm, and she had fretted. Now with another man's child in her arms, and just the same love in her heart, she had the decision, and he the restless pain. In

those days no thought of such love as deals in marriage had ever arisen between them; but now Philip had come all the way from India full of a man's determination to end the story in what the world said was the only possible, natural, or moral ending to any love-story. And on such stories as theirs the worldly verdict runs thus: they had loved each other when they could not marry, which was very wrong; but a kindly Providence having removed the unnecessary husband, they could marry, which set everything right.

The mirk and fog settled very closely round them as they sate by the fire; closer on Philip than on Belle, for it was his turn to be scared by the phantom of foregone conclusions. What he had strenuously denied when the position ran counter to his pride, seemed true enough now that it joined issue with it. He loved Belle, so of course he must want to marry her. The two things were synonymous; when, of course, there was a possibility of getting married. Yet Belle, even with tears in her eyes, could smile as she told him that her first thought in life lay in her arms; that she could not even give him hope in the future, or bid him wait, since the waiting might be forever.

That had been more than five years ago, and there was still a smile on Belle Raby's face as she roused herself from her day-dreams, looked at her watch,

and turned back into the garden. Perhaps he had missed his train. Even if he had he would still come by and by to see how magnificently the roses were blooming that year. There were roses everywhere; wild in the hedgerows, many-coloured in the borders, white in the trailing sprays that climbed round about the verandahs of the low cottage which formed one wing of a plainer yet more important building beyond. It was evidently the later addition of a different taste, for the gardens surrounding them showed a like dissimilarity. In the distance, open stretches of well-kept lawns and wide gravelled paths; civilised, commonplace. Round the cottage a strip almost wild in its profusion of annuals, its unpruned roses, and the encircling shade of tall forest trees which must have stood there long before either the cottage or the pretentious building beyond had been thought of; a strip of garden suggestive, even to a casual observer, of a less conventional fashion of life than is usual in the old country. To Belle, as she stooped to push a tangle of larkspur within reasonable bounds, it served as a reminiscence of days which, with all their sadness, she never ceased to regret. She envied Philip often; Philip in command of his regiment, away on this expedition or that, able to come back always to the sociable yet solitary existence so strangely free from the hurry and strain inseparable from life in the West. Philip,

whose name was known all along the frontier as the boldest soldier on it. A perfect content for and in him glowed at her heart as with her hands clasped behind her she strolled back to the gate. And there he was, his head uncovered, his pace quickening as he saw her. Her pulse quickened too, but she composed herself to calm. For they had a little game to play, this middle-aged man and woman; a game which they had played with the utmost gravity on the rare occasions when Fate brought them into each other's presence.

"Your train is a little late to-day, Phil, isn't it?" she asked as she held the gate open for him.

"Rather. Have you been waiting long?"

His voice trembled a little in the effort to take it all as a matter of course, though hers did not; but then the novelty of environment was greater for him than for her.

"How long is it this time, Phil? I forget, and after all what does it matter? Come and see the roses, dear; there are such a lot out this morning."

He stopped her for an instant by drawing the hand he held towards him, and clasping it in both of his. "More roses than there were yesterday, Belle?" he asked with a sort of eager certainty in his tone.

She looked at him fondly. "Yes, more than yesterday" — then suddenly she laughed and laid her other hand on his. "I will say it, dear, since it

pleases you. There are more roses to-day because you have come, and this is holiday-time."

Their welcome was over; they had stepped for a time into each other's lives. A ridiculous pretence, of course; a mere attempt to make imagination play the part assigned since all eternity to facts. But if it pleased these two, or if it pleases any number of persons who find facts are stubborn things, why should the world quarrel with it? Belle had once on a time made herself unnecessarily miserable by imagining that she and Philip were in love with each other, and that, since love was inextricably bound up with marriage or the desire for it, she must be posing as the heroine of the third-rate French novel. Her consequent loss of self-respect had very nearly spoiled her life, and even Philip had never ventured to think what might have happened had John lived to force them into action. The unreality of her past fears had come home to Belle, however, during the long months when she had waited for her last legacy. And with the first sight of the baby-face whereon Fate had set its mark of failure all too clearly, had come a resolution that in the future nothing but her own beliefs should rule her conduct. Her life and Philip's should not be spoiled by other people's ideas; her imagination should be her slave, not her master. So much, and more, she had said to Philip on that mirky day

when in his first disappointment he had declared that he could not bear it. But that had been five years ago, and life seemed more than bearable as he walked round the garden with her hand drawn through his arm and held there caressingly. A man who is in command of a regiment in which he has served since he was a boy, whose heart is in his profession, whose career has been successful, has other interests in life besides marriage; if he has not, the less he figures as a hero, even in a novel, the better.

"It is like Nilgunj, isn't it?" said Belle pointing to the tangles of flowers.

"With a difference. You can't grow Maréchal Niel roses in England. They were, — well, — overpowering as I came through. Mildred has the garden very nice; you would hardly recognise the place. The trees you planted are taller than the house; but everything grows fast in India, — their eldest girl is up to my elbow. Oh! and Maud was there on a visit, wearing out her old clothes. She hasn't forgiven you yet, Belle, for what she calls throwing away your money and becoming a hospital nurse. I spent some time in trying to explain that you were simply spending your money in the way which pleased you best: but it was no use. She only said that caps were no doubt very becoming. Why don't you wear them, Belle? You always tell

me to take what pleasure I can out of life, and I obey orders."

There was a pause ere he went on. "And Charlie is quite a dandy. More like you, Belle, than I should have thought possible from my recollection of him as a youngster at Faizapore. Allsop gives a first-rate account of him, says he is working splendidly. And Allsop himself! what a rare good fellow he is, with just that touch of determination his race generally lack. He is making the business pay now; not as John would have done, of course, but it supports them and leaves something over for the bloated capitalist. Besides it is so much better for Charlie than loafing about at home like the others."

"You needn't tell me that, Phil," said Belle softly. "Don't you think I see and understand all the good you have forced from what promised to be evil?"

"That is rather strong, isn't it? It would most likely have done as well without my interference; things generally come right in the end, especially if you trust other people. At least that is my experience in the regiment. By the way, I went over to see the old Khân when I was at Nilgunj. He is a bit broken, though he won't allow it, by his wife's death. Obstinate old hero! He declares, too, that it is no satisfaction having his son back

from the Andamans because he is only out on ticket-of-leave. He stickles for a full apology; as if life would be endurable without a grievance of some kind or another. If he only knew how I had back-stairs and earwigged every official on the list over that business! I wasted a whole month's leave at Simla, — which I might have saved up and spent on board a P. and O. steamer, my dear. It was during the rains, and I seemed to live in a water-proof on my way to some *burra sahib* or another. But my pride is all broken and gone to bits, Belle; I shall be asking the authorities for a C.I.E.-ship some day if I don't take care. Well! the old man sent you his *salaam* as usual, said the women ruled the roost nowadays, and in the same breath fell foul of them collectively because his daughter-in-law had not prepared some peculiar sherbet which old Fâtma always produced on state occasions. Not that Haiyât-bi minds his abuse, now she has a husband to bully in her turn. That, says the Khân, is women's way; since the beginning of time deceitful and instinct with guile. And then, Belle — yes, then he brought out the old sword, and here it is, dear, his and mine in the old way, if only in the spirit."

He stood beside her, stretching out his hands in the well-remembered fashion, as if something sacred lay in them and before the tenderness in his face,

the calmness of hers wavered for an instant. "Did we really go through all that together, Phil?" she asked with a tremble in her voice. "Oh my dear, my dear, how much you have all given me! And I give, —so little. But my pride is, like yours, all broken and gone to bits, and I take everything I can get. You should see how I beg for the hospital."

She turned to the big white building beyond the cottage as if to escape into another subject; and Philip turned also.

"Is it, — is it getting along nicely?" he asked dutifully.

"Yes, dear," she replied, looking at him again with a smile; "but we shall have time to talk of that by and by. You haven't given me half the budget of news. And do you know, Phil, I begin to suspect that in writing you tell all the pleasant things and keep back the disagreeables. Now that isn't fair; as children say, it spoils the game."

"Does it? Well, I won't do it again. Let me see what is the most unpleasant story I have heard for the last few months. Ah — yes! that is about the worst." He paused with a frown.

"Well?"

"Only Shunker Dâs is dead. That isn't very distressful; but you remember Kirpo?"

"Why, Philip, it was her husband who —"

"Yes, of course, of course; but I was not thinking of that; only of the day when she came out of the coolies' hut with a child in her arms, and told us why he was called Nuttu. Well, it is a horrid story, Belle, but that pitiless old fatalist the Khân, who was my informant, saw the hand of high heaven in it. Shunker got the telegram informing him that he was to be made a *Rai Bahâdur*, and another announcing his son's death by the same messenger. Ghastly, wasn't it? He had a fit, and though he lived for some weeks they never could understand a word he said, though he talked incessantly. One can imagine what he wanted from the sequel. Well, at his funeral-pyre, up turns Kirpo with a strapping boy of about eight years old, and there was an awful scene. She swore it was Shunker's son, and made the child defile the ashes. Do you remember her face that day, and how I said she hated somebody? Great Heavens! there is something perfectly devilish in the idea of such a revenge."

"And yet we talk calmly enough of the sins of the fathers being visited on the children." She paused as the church clock struck eleven. "It is time I went to see my bairns, Phil. Will you come too? They will be at their best; the out-ones just in from the garden, the in-ones ready for their mid-day rest. They look so comfortable all tucked up in their cots."

The bravest man winces sometimes, and Philip, despite the five years, had never forgotten that day of mirk and fog when he had first seen John Raby's child, and Belle had bidden him go away if he could not be satisfied with what she had to give him. To be satisfied, or go away! Both, it had seemed to him then, equally impossible; yet he had done both. Still the memory was painful. "You are going to build the new wing next year, I suppose?" he said as indifferently as he could when, leaving the shady wilderness, they made their way along the gravel walks which were seamed in every direction by the wheel-marks of invalid carriages.

"It depends," she replied quickly, answering the effort in his tone by a grateful look. "I may not have to build it. I may not be here. I am to go where I am most wanted; that was settled long ago, Phil."

He was silent; what was there to say?

Side by side they climbed the terrace steps to reach the front of the hospital which looked right across a stretch of wind-swept down to the open sea. A row of perambulators and wheeled couches stood under a glazed verandah, and above the level lines of square windows the words "SMITH'S HOME FOR INCURABLE CHILDREN" showed in big gold letters as a balustrade to the semi-Grecian façade.

Belle glanced up at it before passing through the noiseless swinging doors. "I always wish I had been in time to stop that awful inscription," she said; "but it was scarcely worth while pulling it all down. You see none of them can read. We take them young, and those who stop don't live to be old; that is one thing to be thankful for. You don't like my speaking of it, Phil, but I often wonder what would have become of this empty shell of a house if my Jack had been born as most children are born, — as I wished him to be born. Some one would have carried on the work, I suppose, if I hadn't, and yet, — these bairns might have been God knows where, instead of in the sunlight."

She opened an inner door, and signed to him to pass before her. There was sunlight there, and no lack of it, though it shone on sights which to Philip Marsden's unaccustomed eyes seemed to dim the brightness. Rows of little crutches along the walls, weary unchildlike faces resting on the low divans in the windows; in the centre a more cheerful picture of little ones gathered round a table set with bread and milk.

"This is my show room and these are my show babies," said Belle with a smile. "We all get about more or less and play by ourselves; don't we, nurse? And some of us, like Georgie here, are going home again because we are too strong for the place. We

don't keep noisy, romping, rioting ragamuffins, do we, children?"

The face she turned up to hers as she passed grinned doubtfully, but all the other little white faces dimpled and wrinkled with mirth at the very idea of Georgie's exile. They went up stairs now, into more sunshine streaming on rows of beds where childhood wore away with no pleasure beyond a languid joy at a new picture-book or a bunch of flowers. Here they trod softly, for some of the little ones were already asleep.

"Where is Freddy?" asked Belle in a whisper of the nurse busy smoothing an empty cot.

"He seemed so restless this morning, ma'am, that Dr. Simmonds thought we had better put him in the White Ward; he was afraid —"

Belle passed on, her face a shade graver, and as Philip followed her up another wide staircase she paused before a closed door and asked him to wait for her; she would not be long.

He caught a glimpse of a smaller, more home-like room, white and still, with the light shaded from the open windows. Then he stood leaning against the bannisters, watching the dancing motes in a sunbeam slanting down from the skylight overhead; a skylight looking as if it were glazed with sapphire.

"That was the White Ward," said Belle, coming out and passing upward through the beam of light.

She spoke almost cheerfully, but Philip, who had faced death, and worse horrors than death, many a time without a qualm, felt himself shiver. Once again they paused before a closed door and she gave Philip a hurried half-appealing glance, before she said nervously, "I have Jack in this ward now. Dr. Simmonds thinks it good for him to be with the other children, and he seems to like it better."

It was the sunniest room of all, for the windows were set wide open, and the blinds drawn up. The scent of the roses from Belle's garden drifted in with the cool fresh wind. The children had evidently all been out, for a pile of hats and cloaks lay on the table, but they were now seated on their cots awaiting their turn for lunch. Philip's eyes, travelling down the row of beds, rested on a crop of golden curls, and he gave a little exclamation, half groan, half sigh. That was a face he could not mistake, strange and wistful as it was; not an unintelligent face either, and great heavens! how like the father's as it fell stricken to death.

"Listen!" said Belle, touching his arm. A nurse passing with a tray paused in pleased expectancy.

"Jack!" her voice echoed softly through the silence.

The golden head turned, the veriest ghost of a smile came to the pinched face, and the thin little hands stretched themselves aimlessly into space with

a sudden plaintive cry which sent a lump to Philip's throat.

"Lor!" protested the nurse full of pride; "didn't he say it beautiful clear that time? Mother? Yes, it is mother, my pretty; and you knows her voice, don't you, dearie? just as well as any on us."

Belle sate down on the cot, gathering the child in her arms, and the yellow curls nestled down contentedly on her shoulder. A mite of a boy with great wide blue eyes fixed on the only face he ever recognises. "Do you think him grown at all?" she asked; then seeing Philip's look bent over the child and kissed the blue veins on the large forehead. There was a passion of protection in her kisses. "If he were the only one, Phil, I should break my heart about it; but there are so many,— and,— and it is so causeless." Her eyes seemed to pass beyond the child and she went on more cheerfully, "Then he is such a contented little fellow when he is with me, — aren't you, Jack?"

Again came the ghost of a smile, and the same plaintive cry. Philip walked to the window and looked out on the roses. It was a very slight thing, that cry, to have come between a man and a woman, — if it had come between them. He turned to look at Belle instinctively, and found her looking at him. No! nothing had come between them. Before the insoluble problem of what Belle held in her arms

love seemed to him forever divorced from marriage. The veriest pariah, born of God knows what, or of whom, the outcome of the basest passion, might enter the world fair and strong and capable, while their child, if they married, bringing each to each a pure devotion, might be as these children here.

He crossed the room again and sate down on the bed beside her. "How many have you in the hospital now?" he asked in a low voice, for Jack, contented and comfortable, was evidently falling asleep.

"Fifty; but Dr. Simmonds says he could fill a hundred beds to-morrow. It is the best place, he declares, of its kind."

"Would you undertake so much?"

She shook her head. "I never know,— no one knows from day to day. They are all so frail. Freddy, for instance, was no worse yesterday, and to-day! There are plenty to fill my place here when, — when the time comes."

"It may never come. Besides," he added, "I may be incurable myself ere long. Don't you remember promising me the gatekeeper's place if ever I was pensioned off minus a leg or an arm?"

"Did I?" she answered in the same light tone, as she rose to lay little Jack on his pillow and draw the blanket over him. "Then I must warn the present old cripple that his place isn't a permanent

one. Isn't he like his father, Phil?" she added, laying her hand on the child's pretty soft curls.

"Very."

They passed along the sunny corridors again and so out into the open air. Philip drew his hand over his forehead as if to brush away puzzling thoughts, and gave a sigh of relief. "Come down to the cliffs with me, Belle," he said. "There is plenty of time before lunch, and I feel as if I wanted a blow. It's rather an irrelevant remark, but I wonder what will become of the babies if women become men?"

They crossed the downs keeping step together, and walking rapidly as if to leave something behind, finally seating themselves in a niche between two great white pillars of chalk, whence they could see the waves ebbing and flowing among the rocks at their feet. The horizon and the sky were blent into one pale blue, so that the fishing boats with their red-brown sails seemed hovering between earth and heaven.

"How long is it this time?" she asked after a pause. "The usual three months?"

"Yes! the usual three months from the frontier. That leaves me six weeks with you; six whole weeks."

There was another pause. "Philip!" she said suddenly, "I'll marry you to-morrow if you like,— if,— if it would make you happier."

He was sitting with his hands between his knees, looking out absently over the waves below. He did not stir, but she could see a smile struggling with his gravity.

"My dear Belle! The banns haven't been called."

"Perhaps we could afford a special license on the easy-purchase system by monthly instalments," she suggested quite as gravely. "But really, Philip, when I see you — "

"Growing so old; don't be afraid of the truth, Belle. Am I very bald?"

"Bald! No, but you are grizzling fast, Phil; and when the fact is brought home to me by seeing it afresh, I ask myself why you shouldn't have a wife and children."

"I could, of course; there are plenty of young ladies now on the frontier. Oh, Belle! I thought we had settled this long ago. You can't leave Jack; you wouldn't with a clear conscience, if you could. I can't leave the regiment; I shouldn't like to, if I could. Is not that an end of marriage from our point of view? Besides," he turned to her now with a smile full of infinite tenderness, "I am not at all sure that I do want to marry you. When perfection comes into a man's life, can you not understand his being a little afraid — "

"Philip!"

"Not of you, dear; but this love of ours seems

better than we are ourselves,— than *I* am, certainly. Then marriage, as I take it, is for young people, and what they call Love is the bribe held out by Nature to induce her thoughtless children to undertake a difficult duty. The sweet isn't unwholesome in itself, but that is no reason why we should call it manna from heaven and say it is better than plain, wholesome bread and butter."

"You are growing detestably didactic in your old age, Phil. When you come to the gatekeeper's house I shall have to amend your ways."

"You forget I shall be incurable then; but you are right. I am fast becoming a real old crusted military fogy, and of all fogies that is the worst. You can't think what a nuisance I am to the boys at mess; they depute a fresh one to prose to the Colonel every night."

"I know better. When young Cameron came home sick he had a very different story."

"Young Cameron isn't to be trusted. To begin with he had had a sunstroke, and then he proposed marrying on subaltern's pay."

"Well, you can't expect the world to give up falling in love because you don't approve."

"Let it fall by all means; only let us call things by their proper names. You and I, Belle, know the trouble which follows on the present confusion. And if we, eminently respectable people, suffered

much, many must suffer more. Many! Why the question, 'Is Marriage a Failure?' fills up the interstices of conversation left between the Rights of Labour and Home Rule. How can it be anything but a failure when people are taught to expect impossibilities? when they are told that love is better than duty? Thank heaven, we never were in love with one another!"

"Never?"

"No, — at least, — yes! perhaps I was one day. Do you remember when you kissed your cousin Dick in the church garden at Faizapore? I was decidedly jealous as I stood by the canal bridge. If he had lived, Belle, I think you would have married him."

She did not answer, but sate softly smiling to herself. "So long ago as that," she said at last in a contented tone of voice.

Philip started to his feet with a half-embarrassed laugh. Even now, after all these years, her woman's nature, in its utter inconsequence, was a puzzle to him, — perhaps to herself.

"Come," he said prosaically, "I'm sure it must be time for lunch."

"Are you so very hungry?" she asked, dusting from her dress, with something of regret in the action, the sweet-smelling herbs which she had idly gathered from the crannies of the cliff and crumbled to pieces for the sake of their perfume.

"I ought to be, seeing I had no breakfast."

She started up in her turn. "Philip! How could you? and never to tell me!"

"You see we were late all through; something went wrong somewhere, and then I had to catch the ten o'clock train. Don't look horrified; I got a stale bun at Swindon."

"Stale buns are most unwholesome."

"That is what materialists like you always say of any diet which does not suit them. Personally I like stale buns."

"You mean that you can put up with them when you have a solid lunch in prospect."

He had taken her hand to help her to the level and now suddenly he paused, and stooping kissed it passionately. "Oh, Belle, my darling, why should we talk or think of the future? To-day is holiday-time and I am happy."

So, hand in hand, like a couple of children, they went homewards across the down; while the great gilt letters of the legend above the hospital glowed and shone like a message of fire against the blue sky.

Was that the end of the story, so far as Belle and Philip were concerned? Or on some other sunshiny day in a future June or December did those two pass through the churchyard where the tiny flower-set graves grew more numerous year by year, and, be-

neath the tower whose chime had so often called Belle to her bairns, take each other for better, for worse? Most likely they did, but it is a trivial detail which has nothing to do with the record of Miss Stuart's Legacy. That began with her father, and ended with her child. She paid it cheerfully to the uttermost farthing, and was none the worse for it. Such payments, indeed, leave us no poorer unless we choose to have it so. The only intolerable tax being that which follows on the attempt to inherit opinions; for, when we have paid it, we have nothing in exchange save something that is neither real estate nor personal property.

THE END.

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